

**Representation of marriage and relationships in romantic
comedies from 2010**

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Abstract

The mass media portrays traditional forms of marital status in contemporary films despite changing demographics. This thesis argues that romantic relationships are presented as a normative and significant part of completing a predetermined life course in adulthood. Specifically, recent films are entrenched with ideological messages regarding heterosexual marriage and fail to represent singles adequately. In Canadian society, legal marriage is becoming less frequent, common law relationships are increasing, family formations are more diverse, and individuals are happily choosing to be single. Therefore, it is crucial to explore if the media, a powerful socializing agent, communicates a preference for marriage by promoting the ideology of marriage. A content analysis was performed on nine top grossing films that were released in 2010. Overall, the findings demonstrate that regardless of changing demographics, the media privileges marriage and marginalizes singlehood. These films contribute to strengthening traditional ideologies of marriage and family and reinforce discrimination against singles.

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Introduction

Sexism, racism, ageism and various other forms of discrimination are popular subjects for critical analysis. Each of these prejudicial realities have been identified and acknowledged as significant problems within society; their existence has been recognized as a major social issue that demands reform in order to improve equality and social opportunity. Although various forms of discrimination are still prevalent within society, many of these forms of discrimination have been publicly acknowledged by individuals and through institutions as problematic. Furthermore, measures have been introduced which attempt to reduce the practice of discrimination and prejudice. However, despite these efforts, oppression based on gender, sex, race, ethnicity, age and various other demographics continues to permeate society (Zawilski & Levine-Rasky, 2005). Yet, the reality that individuals experience unequal treatment based upon certain individual traits has been documented, verbalized and publicized. Individuals have adopted a common knowledge, which identifies men as being privileged over women, fair skinned individuals being privileged over darker skinned individuals, abled persons having precedence over disabled individuals and so forth. Many of these forms of oppression are communicated through the mass media as it is entrenched with ideologies that shape our understanding of life (Lull, 2000). One dimension of an individual's identity that results in discrimination – yet has not received adequate acknowledgment – is marital status. Demographics of the family and marital status have changed immensely from the traditional nuclear family, however, it is important to inquire if the value system of society has altered to reflect these changing demographics.

This study therefore seeks to explore the relationship between contemporary romantic comedies and the ideology of marriage and family. Specifically, this study examines and

identifies the messages that recent films perpetuate in regards to marriage and relationships. Signorielli (1991) conducted a ten-year study of youth internalizing messages from prime time television shows. Significantly, Signorielli's study found that familial and marital expectations are related to the amount of time absorbing television messages. This study investigates nine romantic comedies that were released in 2010. A content analysis is performed in order to derive the dominant themes and subject matter regarding marital status.

The thesis will begin with a literature review. The literature review outlines changing demographics in Canada. Specifically, the following sections will be discussed in detail: the mass media as a socializing agent, social norms, history of marriage and the nuclear family, marriage and common law relationships, marriage in Canada, singles, discrimination against singles, changing families and changing norms and finally the impact on men and women. Following this literature review the theoretical framework will be presented which includes a discussion of ideology, discrimination, media and intersectionality. The third chapter will outline the methodological framework, the criteria for choosing the sample and explain how content analysis is performed. Chapter four summarizes the data presented from the content analysis. This summary will be followed by a discussion of the data, the patterns that emerge and what the social implications of these patterns are. The data will be examined in regards to the theoretical framework. Finally, a conclusion will provide a synopsis of the research question, findings and suggestions as to how research might be expanded.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

Mass Media: Socializing Agent

The mass media circulates ideas and socializes individuals. A study was published in 1991 by a researcher named Nancy Signorielli. This study found that after watching prime time television shows over a ten-year period, the audience would likely hold similar values regarding the family to those that were presented on television (Signorielli, 1991). This study is dated as it was conducted over twenty years ago, however the findings are significant as they identify the ability of the media to socialize its audience. Arnett (1995) identifies youth living in industrialized countries are exposed to media on a daily basis. Adolescents are especially vulnerable to the media and can be easily influenced by what they view or read because they are experiencing a time of self development, figuring out their gender roles and specifically establishing their beliefs and values (Arnett, 1995). People of all ages are influenced and socialized by the media. The mass media is everywhere and for this reason it is important to consider what messages are being circulated.

Socialization is defined as the following “socialization is the process by which everyone learns the lessons that others deem necessary for them to fit into their group” (Doyle & Paludi, 1995:97). Therefore, socialization includes teaching children and adults how they are supposed to act in order to fit into societal norms. The socialization process begins when a child is born. For example, infants are often dressed in either feminine (pink) or masculine (blue) clothing, which allows others to identify the sex of the child (Doyle & Paludi, 1998). Individuals are socialized by a variety of sources such as the family, school, the media, etc.

As a whole, the media communicates messages from one group to another. In this way, the messages distributed by the media are communicated to mass amounts of people. This content can play a role in framing how individuals perceive themselves and their role in society. As a result, the media provides its audience with information that shapes how individuals understand the world. For example, the media has been accused of presenting very traditional presentations of men and women in terms of gender roles (Doyle & Paludi, 1998). Therefore, men and women might perceive their gender role similar to how it is presented on television. Because the media socializes individuals, it is a powerful tool. Significantly, literature recognizes that the media is often owned and operated by “whitestream interests” (Fleras, 2011:53). As a result, media content is typically representative of information that is similar to the experiences of the owners: often older, heterosexual white men (Fleras, 2011). As a result, the mass media often serves elite groups of society and dominant institutions (Fleras, 2010). Therefore, it is important to consider what content is presented and how it may influence the audience.

Signorielli’s study conducted from 1976 to 1986 explored the portrayal of marriage and family in several television shows that aired during prime time. The study by Signorielli is significant because it systematically assessed the content produced by this socializing agent.

Signorielli (1991) identified that marriage and family are presented as dominant themes in prime time television shows. She argued that prime time media content portrays a homogenous view that privileges the nuclear family and heterosexual marriage. In addition, the centrality of marriage and family demonstrate how the media reinforces cultural and social norms. Signorielli (1991: 123) recognized that in 1991 there was a complete lack of

research regarding watching television and how it influences individual's views towards marriage and "interpersonal intimate relationships". There is also an insufficient amount of research pertaining to the portrayal of marriage and family in recent films. On the other hand, a great deal of research has been conducted to measure how violence in the media influences the audience. For example, Huesmann & Taylor (2009) identify the media as a primary socializing agent and argue that exposure to media violence can lead to aggressive or violent behaviour. The presentation of civil status is merely another theme that exists in the mass media. Therefore, the manner in which civil status is depicted requires investigation in addition to considering how the specific depictions affect individuals.

The study conducted by Signorielli demonstrates that adolescents internalized similar messages regarding marriage and family as was presented in television shows. An established link between social expectations and watching television reveal the power that the media has in shaping individuals beliefs. Because Signorielli (2005) has discovered that ideological messages pertaining to marriage in the media have in fact had an influence on how teens perceive their predetermined life course, it is crucial to examine the content in contemporary films and consider how they might have an influence on Canadian norms and expectations. This study was performed in between 1976-1986, therefore it is questionable whether the messages have remained constant over the past twenty years or if they have evolved to be more diverse as times have changed.

Signorielli (1991) identified that the presentation of marriage remained stable and frequent over the ten-year period in prime time television shows. Including marriage as a regular and frequent theme reinforces the cultural and social importance of marriage. A consistent focus on marriage in the mass media has several consequences. It demonstrates to

the audience that marriage is something of great importance in life. Signorielli (1991) found that married couples were generally portrayed as happy while singles were depicted as unhappy. This is meaningful because viewers might interpret these portrayals as marriage causing happiness, while interpreting single life and divorce as leading to unhappiness. These representations suggest that individuals will be unhappy if they do not marry. The representations that Signorielli (1991) identified heavily promote marriage to the audience by highlighting the negatives of singlehood and positives of married life. Continuous illustrations of marriage situate it as a social norm. Including marriage and divorce as primary themes in narratives suggest the occurrence of marriage, even if it is followed by divorce.

Another overarching theme that was identified was the family-household-marriage combination (Signorielli, 1991:128). Recent literature reveals dominant ideologies and traditional values as being embedded within the mass media (Fleras, 2011; Lull, 2000). Specifically, the media regularly paints positive illustrations of married or coupled individuals and negative portrayals of singles (Gordon, 1994; Hackstaff, 1999). Therefore, recent films require critical examination to identify what messages are presented through film to widespread audiences regarding marriage and family.

Social Norms

Social norms represent what is perceived to be socially normal. Social norms can be shared expectations about how individuals should behave, what life path they will occupy, how they will perform their gender, etc. Specifically, social norms are defined as “rules and standards that are understood by members of a group, and that guide and/or constrain social behaviour without the force of law” (Cialdini & Trost, 1998:152). Social norms provide

individuals with an idea of how they are supposed to act. They contribute to how to dress, how to talk, how to move, how we treat our neighbors and much more.

Social norms create a path for individuals who belong to a certain group. Individuals belong to various groups even in the most basic form of age groups, or gender groups. Individuals are presented with a standard that they are unconsciously pressured to follow for being a man or woman. Social norms are significant because they represent an idea, which is often an ideal that individuals expect themselves and others to follow because straying from the norm equals marginalization. For example, there are strong gender norms, which are tied to being female and male. Men are expected to be masculine, while women are expected to be feminine. Both masculinity and femininity involve distinct roles that are normative. Marriage is a social norm that is deeply tied to gender (Doyle & Paludi, 1998). Specifically, being a wife and mother is profoundly linked to femininity. The nuclear family is also perceived to be normal and the natural family form in Canada. It is important to study social norms because they create a standard through which *other* alternatives are measured against. Through naming one practice as normal, the *other* practice automatically because abnormal. With this phenomena and living in a diverse country comes profound discrimination and marginalization against groups and individuals who divert from social norms.

History of Marriage and the Nuclear Family

Marriage is a social norm. It is an institution that has been socially constructed as a traditional and fundamental component to the composition of the ‘natural family’ (Kimmel & Holler, 2011). As a result, in order to attain the “normal” family, which is perceived as a nuclear family (Cargan, 2007; Luxton & Fox, 2009), individuals imagine themselves and others to legally marry. According to Luxton and Fox (2009) the nuclear family is embedded

within Canadian culture as the natural and normal family form. For this reason, marriage is socially considered as a normative event and accomplishment. Marriage and the nuclear family are reinforced through institutions (such as the family) and ideologies as natural (Luxton & Fox, 2009). Luxton and Fox (2009) support this statement by acknowledging that a common belief among individuals is that “biology is a ‘given’ (p. 4). Reproduction is viewed as ‘naturally’ leading to heterosexual relationships and nuclear families, thereby normalizing heteronormativity (Luxton & Fox, 2009).

Historically, marriage was socially required for individuals if they wanted to attain a *legitimate* family life (Luxton & Fox, 2009; Vanier, 2010). In the past, both men and women relied on marriage to fulfill certain roles in their life. Moreover, in the past marriage was strongly influenced by family members, particularly parents. Marrying was an exchange between two sets of parents and the establishment of a partnership between two children. Since the 1900s, reasons to marry have evolved over time and parents have less power in determining marriage patterns of their children (Kimmel & Holler, 2011).

The ‘traditional’ and ‘natural’ family is usually considered the nuclear family, consisting of a married heterosexual couple with children. This particular familial structure has been identified as the norm since it formed as dominant in the 1950s (Luxton & Fox, 2009). This family form was not considered the standard until after the Second World War when young soldiers returned home and marriage and family life was attainable (Kimmel & Holler, 2011). At this time in Canada, marriage rates increased, the age of marriage decreased and divorce rates were extremely low (Kimmel & Holler, 2011). ‘Traditional’ gender roles were emphasized at this time through advertising, women moved back into the domestic sphere and returning soldiers replaced the women in the workforce. According to

Kimmel and Holler (2011) both men and women were happy to embrace this “nostalgia” (p.185). The nuclear family was promoted through religion and was seen as a peaceful refuge that would enable the country to flourish after World War II (Adams, 2009). Most importantly, as quickly as the nuclear family took form in society, it became understood as the most natural and healthy family form possible (Kimmel & Holler, 2011). Evidently, individuals were excited to find a spouse, have children and follow the social path. The normalcy tied to the nuclear family also places a strong pressure on individuals to marry, remain married and be happy doing so.

Dissatisfaction with the nuclear family became evident in the late 1950s. Women protested against their assigned gender roles; specifically targeting the required domesticity of their everyday lives (Kimmel & Holler, 2011). As men and women exercised their power through protest, the dynamics of the nuclear family were challenged. Women fought for increased rights, which would move women into the public sphere through work. This is significant because as women moved into the public sphere they became less and less dependent on their spouses (Fox & Yiu, 2009). The discontent with traditional gender roles that has been identified - domestic for women and providing for men – is linked to the so-called strain on the nuclear family that Canada still experiences today.

The belief that the nuclear family is normal remains a powerful belief in Canadian society. As Kimmel & Holler (2011) recognize, although the nuclear family only became dominant in the 1950s, its structure and assigned gender roles remain idealized today. A profound social value is linked to marriage as well as the prospect of marriage. The nuclear family became normative because in the early twentieth century families could typically survive on one income (Luxton, 2009). As a result, women were responsible for the domestic

sphere, which entailed rearing children, cleaning and taking care of elderly or sick family members. Men on the other hand, were primarily responsible for generating income (Luxton, 2009). If the husbands' income was exceptionally high, less pressure was put on other family members to find paid work. However, as monetary expenses increased, families required increasing amounts of money to survive and women often moved into the public sphere in search of paid work (Luxton, 2009). Contrary to ideological values, family structure and marriage patterns in Canada have moved substantially from the ideal that they are measured against, which is that of the nuclear family. Today family patterns are more diverse including households made up of married, common law, single parents, adopted children, etc. For instance, Statistics Canada reported that in 2006 married couples made up 68.6% of families, while 15.5% of families were composed of common-law couples and 15.9% by lone-parent families (Statistics Canada, 2012b). Overall, marriage patterns have shifted an incredible amount, while the shift in social values is seemingly delayed.

There are quite a few reasons used by sociologists to explain the later age of first marriage in addition to the decreasing numbers of marriage. For example, it is more acceptable for individuals to delay marriage while they work to arrange other priorities such as acquiring further education or securing adequate employment (Cargan, 2007). This is true, especially for women as it is not necessary for them to enter a conjugal partnership in order to ensure economic stability (Arnett, 2004). The advancements in women's rights have been linked to the later age of first marriage for women, for instance through the introduction of contraceptives (Arnett, 2004). In addition, women today often pursue a postsecondary education, which is another reason associated with postponing marriage (Clark, 2007). For this reason, the decrease in marriage can be associated with improved gender equality. With

increased opportunities women have greater access to resources, which functions to lessen their economic dependency on men. These resources can include access to higher education and/or work outside the home.

Riedmann et al. (2003) identify four reasons as to why marriage is occurring later in life for Canadians. First, changes in the economy have left young adults dependent on their parents for longer as pay is low, work is temporary and as a result of finances young marriages are less like to occur (Riedmann et al, 2003). Improved contraceptives are a second reason why people are able to delay getting married. With readily available contraceptives, couples are less like to get pregnant and feel social obligations to marry. The third reason why marriage is less likely to occur is purely based on demographics and the sex ratio in Canada (Riedmann et al, 2003). The last reason Riedmann et al. (2003) associate with declining rates of marriage in Canada is the changing attitudes towards marriage and singlehood. As previously acknowledged, cultural changes reflect a society that values personal autonomy and in that sense make remaining single more desirable and acceptable (Riedmann et al, 2003). Furthermore, being involved in a common law union has many of the same benefits as a legal marriage does in Canada. These benefits will be discussed in the following section.

Today, it is more acceptable for individuals to choose against marriage (Riedmann et al, 2003). The fact that marriage is now an option for individuals instead of a necessity decreases the pressure placed on individuals to marry and is most likely a large reason why marriages are happening less often. However, despite the drastic change in demographics and the freedom of both men and women to pursue their individual aspirations, there is still a significant amount of pressure placed on individuals to marry (Reynolds, 2008; Riedmann et

al, 2003). Individuals place this pressure on themselves by anticipating marriage. The pressure grows to be more intense as individuals reach the social age when marriage is *supposed* to occur, which is around thirty years old (Cargan, 2007). In Canada, it is essential to question why marriage is still believed to be such a fundamental phase in adulthood.

As previously outlined, marriage is considered to be a significant step towards becoming an adult (Arnett, 2004; Clark, 2007; DePaulo, 2006). In the past, getting married was also a means for men and women to secure a nuclear family, provide a chance for legitimate reproduction and was a way for individuals to conform nicely into social norms. Evidently, marriage does not function in the same manner that it did even thirty years ago. The composition of Canadian families is quite diverse and is shifting away from the conventional nuclear family (Riedmann et al, 2003; Statistics Canada: *Canadians*. March 28th, 2012). Increasing numbers of common law relationships are one indicator of how familial structures are changing.

Marriage and Common Law Relationships: Demographics

Marriage patterns are a popular topic of discussion, especially in the media. Marriage rates and marital status are also a common topic found in newspaper articles. It is not uncommon to stumble across articles that highlight the decreasing numbers of marriage in Canada or articles that emphasize the importance of marriage. For example, a headline by The Ottawa Citizen: “Young adults wait to get married study finds; wedded bliss seen as an important life commitment”; this title stresses the significance of marriage to the general public (Proudfoot, 2011). Similarly, Margaret Wentz acknowledged marriage in a similar manner in The Globe and Mail: “Why weddings matter more than ever” (2010). These articles are merely a couple of examples, yet they are symbolic of a larger phenomenon. The

regular focus on marriage rates, weddings and divorce reinforce that marital status is a widespread topic. The media routinely provides individuals with information to discuss the status of relationships and marriage in Canada. Most importantly, frequent reference to marriage and relationships in newspapers and films reflect the social importance that is placed on marriage. This section will explore the latest Canadian demographics as identified by Statistics Canada.

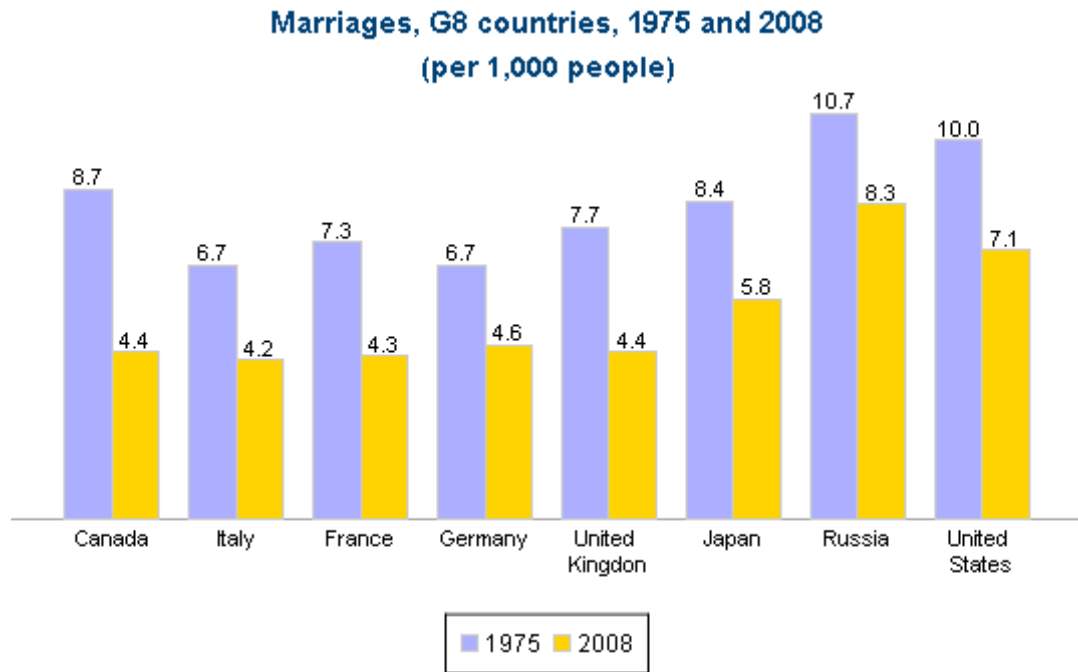


Figure 1 Marriages, G8 countries, 1975 and 2008

Source: Statistics Canada, 2012c.

On an international level, Canada, along with the seven other countries of the G8, have experienced a consistent decrease in the occurrence of marriage (Statistics Canada: *Family*, March 27th, 2012). Figure 1 depicts the dramatic decrease in marriage rates that each of these countries have experienced since 1975. There is clear indication that demographics

regarding marriage have shifted dramatically in some of the most developed countries in the world.

Marriage in Canada

In Canada, married status represents a person who is legally married or is living in a common-law union (Statistics Canada, March 28th, 2012). People fifteen years and older are included in census reports regarding marital status. Therefore, those who are not in a common-law union or legally married are considered to be single or a variation of single (i.e., divorced, separated, widowed). DePaulo (2006) recognizes that including people at age fifteen in the census regarding marital status is problematic because marriage typically does not occur before age eighteen. Altogether, there are six marital statuses that are used by Statistics Canada to classify Canadian individuals over the age of fifteen into categories pertaining to marital status. Among these various marital statuses are married, living common law, widowed, separated, divorced and single (Statistics Canada, 2012b). Individuals who are categorized as married, widowed, separated and divorced include people who are legally married or at one point were legally married and have lost a spouse, separated from their spouse (for reasons other than illness, work or school) or legally divorced their spouse (Statistics Canada, 2012b). Living common law entails living with a partner of the same or opposite sex as a couple (Statistics Canada, 2012b).

The following graphs are specific to Canadian society and offer insight to the overall position of marriage in Canada. The first chart is useful in demonstrating the general pattern of marriage since 1921.

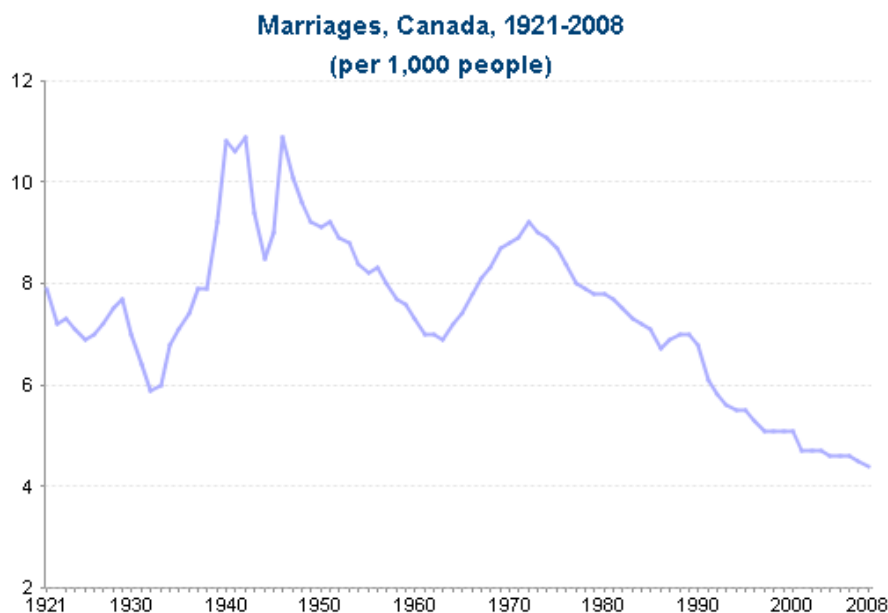


Figure 2: Marriages, Canada, 1921-2008

Source: Statistics Canada: *Indicators*. Accessed: March 27th, 2012.

This graph indicates that the frequency of marriage in Canada has continuously fluctuated. In 2008 147,288 marriages were performed in Canada. The rate of marriage in present Canadian society has reached its lowest point yet. Figure 2 demonstrates that until recently, the lowest occurrence of marriage occurred during the Great Depression. In 1932, the recorded low rate of marriage was 5.9, whereas in 2008 it was 4.4. During the 1930's, the lower number of marriages was undisputedly linked to a lack of personal resources and specifically, to limited financial means to marry because of the depression (Schwartz & Scott, 1997).

The decrease in marriage can be partially associated with an increase in common law partnerships (Statistics Canada, 2012c). Overall, the reduced number of marriages could reflect an evolution of marriage as an institution, individuals choosing to participate in common law relationships, a growing number of individuals who are choosing to remain single, individuals who are choosing to be seriously coupled, those who decide against

marriage or have other diverse situations. For almost forty years, marriage rates in Canada have been decreasing and by examining Figure 2, it appears unlikely that these trends will endure a dramatic reversal. The following graph illustrates a more specific outline of marriage in Canada by gender and age.

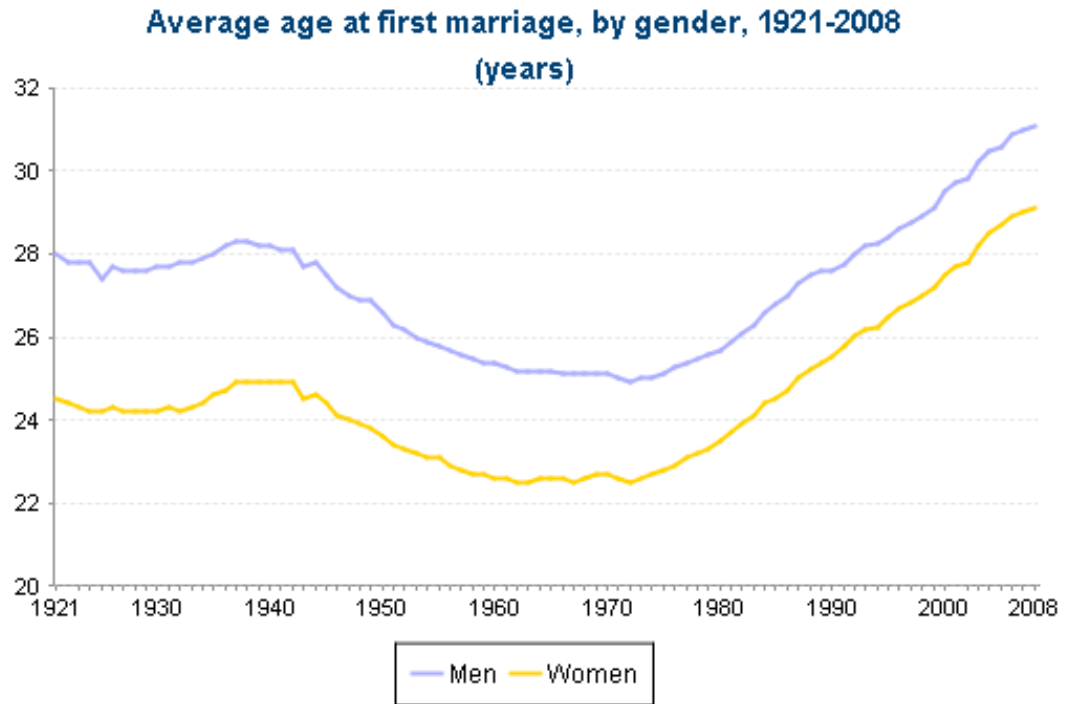


Figure 3: Average age at first marriage, by gender, 1921-2008 (years)

Source: Statistics Canada, 2012c.

Figure 3 examines marriage from an age and gender perspective. It demonstrates how marriage patterns have fluctuated between genders by age from 1921-2006. Regardless of the benefits that are gained through marriage, most importantly, marriage is still a relevant institution in the lives of both men and women. Figure 3 indicates that men and women experience marriage at different points in their lives, with women consistently marrying at a younger age. Although marriage rates have fluctuated since 1921, the age distinction

between sexes has remained generally constant with gender ages changing in tandem. The consistent increase of age changes by gender could be attributed to various factors.

The following chart is significant because it demonstrates the fluctuation of marriage rates between the different regions of Canada. As indicated, Quebec, Yukon, North-West Territories and Nunavut had the lowest rates of marriage per one thousand people in 2008.



Figure 4: Marriages, by region, 2008 (per 1,000 people)

Source: Statistics Canada, 2012c.

The low occurrence of marriage in Quebec, the Yukon, the North-West Territories and Nunavut is justified by higher numbers of common law unions (Statistics Canada, 2012c). Figure five demonstrates growing numbers of common law unions in Canada. Observably, the amount of common-law unions has increased by almost ten percent since 1981 until 2006. In 1981, common law unions formed only 5.6 percent of the Canadian population, whereas in 2006, 15.5 percent of the population was made up by common law relationships (Statistics Canada, 2012a).

**Common-law families, by region, 1981 and 2006
(percent)**

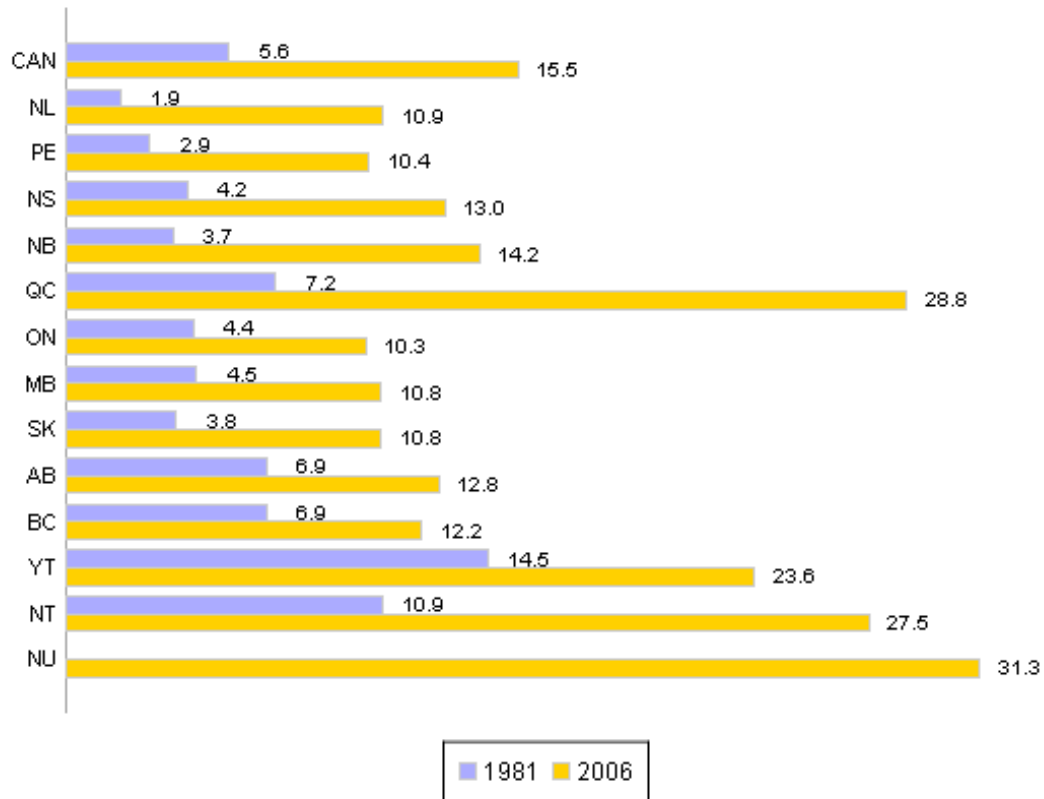


Figure 5: Common-law families, by region, 1981 and 2006 (percent)

Source: Statistics Canada, 2012a

Each of the charts that have been incorporated reveals the diversity of relationship patterns in Canada. The charts demonstrate that marriage rates in Canada have been on a relatively steady decline since the 1970s (Figure 2). At this time, the age of first marriage starting rising for both men and women (Figure 3). Furthermore, as legal marriage rates decline in Canada, common law unions increase (Figure 5). The regional difference in common-law relationships could be due to provincial policies or culture. However, the growth in common law relationships indicate that serious coupling is still of some value in Canada and the institution of marriage is simply less frequent.

This paper does not have the length to explore the great diversity of marriage trends that exist within Canada. However, Figure 4 and 5 provide an overall impression of the rate of marriage and common law unions by province or territory. Significantly, these two charts reveal that although we can draw generalized assumptions of Canada as a whole, there are in fact great diversities that must not be forgotten. Nevertheless, three events can be summarized from these charts.

First, Figure 1 demonstrates that marriage decreased significantly between 1975 and 2008. Secondly, Figure 3 shows that the age of first marriage is increasing. Thirdly, Figure 5 reveals that common law relationships occur more often than in the past. Most importantly, Figure 3 and 5, specifically Figure 5 reflect the fact that marriage and common law relationships persist for many Canadians.

Singles

In 2006 twenty-six percent of Canadian households were composed of singles, which reflected people who lived alone (Statistics Canada, 2012a). In addition, four percent of Canadians were living with individuals they were not related to (not considered a familial household). Although, a portion of this social group may include individuals who are in relationships, many of these people are singles by choice. This statistic is significant because it represents singles as representing one quarter of Canadian adults. Moreover, this statistic also demonstrates that a substantial amount of Canadians are challenging social norms by remaining single and choosing not to marry. In relation to the family, single-parent households are also increasing with almost sixteen percent of family households being headed by one parent (Statistics Canada, 2012a). It is clear that singles maintain an incredibly large position in Canada. These statistics are important to consider especially

when exploring the link between family and marriage. Because a significant number of families are single parent households, it is problematic that marriage and family is conceptualized as one.

Discrimination Against Singles

Discrimination refers to the exclusion of particular individuals in society. In particular, discrimination occurs when “any one group of a set of groups is continuously excluded” (Isajiw, 1999:112). Isajiw (1999) argues that when people are marginalized from different forms of ‘vacancies’ they are victims of discrimination. Vacancies can include anything from employment opportunities to residential and educational opportunities (Isajiw, 1999). As individuals are pushed to the margins, they experience less access to resources, putting them at a disadvantage as compared to others. Discrimination is experienced by individuals based on dimensions of their identity such as their gender, age, race, etc. Racism and sexism are regular topics of discussion in the social sciences and great advancements have been legally implemented in an attempt to reduce discrimination against African Americans or against women for example. DePaulo & Morris (2005) suggest that because the ideology of marriage and family is embedded within society at such a profound level, singlism goes unrecognized and unquestioned. DePaulo and Morris (2005) name this process of discrimination as singlism.

Being single in Canada entails experiencing some form of discrimination, even if it is subtle. When individuals remain single they challenge the normalcy tied to marriage and the nuclear family. DePaulo and Morris (2005) have recognized that singles fall victim to stigmatization, discrimination and are perceived negatively. Singlism differs from other forms of discrimination or prejudice because instead of singles experiencing hate, as occurs

in racism for example – singles are often approached with feelings of pity (DePaulo, 2006). The discrimination experienced by African Americans is incredibly deeper and the consequences are more severe than that experienced by singles (DePaulo, 2006). However, the significance of pity being geared towards singles is reflective of a belief that they are lacking something fundamental in life – in this case, marriage or being involved in a romantic union (DePaulo, 2006). Pity for singles reflects the idea that singles are “lonely and deprived of adventures and fun” (DePaulo & Morris, 2005:60). At the same time, coupled or married individuals are perceived as much happier, more mature and satisfied with their current situation (DePaulo & Morris, 2006). Abma (2010) reinforced this statement with his article title “For better or for worse, happiness is linked to marriage”, which was published in the Vancouver Sun in 2010. Discrimination against singles is described by Cargan (2007) as evident in “the deliberate perpetuation by society of what is believed to be the dominant system of couples” (54). In this quote, Cargan (2007) recognizes that singles do not socially fit into a coupled world. The status of being single is perceived as an alternative to being married or seriously coupled (Cargan, 2007). Singles do not fit into the normative pattern of achieving a spouse and therefore defy social norms. These points suggest that first we live in a couples’ world and secondly occupying any marital status other than coupled is an alternative to the ideal, which singles are inevitably compared to. As a result, singles are perceived as being deprived of something major.

When singles experience discrimination or negative behaviour they often do not recognize that it is systemic (DePaulo, 2006). DePaulo and Morris (2005) argue that singles are discriminated against in terms of finding housing, employment benefits, car insurance, etc. This is significant for women as they generally earn less income compared to men.

Singlism is embedded deeply within social values and norms and is therefore internalized by individuals at a young age. Arnett (2004) reiterates this point by stating that marriage is something that most teens and young adults expect for themselves, however they are not in a rush to achieve the married life and therefore delay it. Staying single is likely to be accepted while young adults are in the process of achieving other goals (Riedmann et al., 2003).

However, what happens when individuals finish achieving their goals and remain single?

Any act of discrimination however small requires acknowledgement because it leads to the marginalization and exclusion of individuals from society.

Changing Families and Changing Norms

Examining the changing structure of Canadian families is necessary as marriage is a central characteristic to achieving the ideal familial situation by attaining a nuclear family (Kimmel & Holler, 2011). In 2006, the nuclear family represented only 34.6 percent of Canadian families (Statistics Canada: *Canadians*. 2012). The reduction in the nuclear family is tied to the diminishing occurrence of marriage in Canada. In addition, as demonstrated in Figure 5 common law relationships are becoming more common and are another reason for the decrease in nuclear families. Recognizing that just over one third of the families in Canada are nuclear households implies a huge shift in the practice of family and explicitly demonstrates that the nuclear family is not the norm anymore in Canada (Kimmel & Holler, 2011; Statistics Canada, 2012a). Canadians families and households are diverse. Individuals have ample options in the life path they choose to follow in present day culture. As a result, *other* family forms must be recognized, not by their separation from the ideal, but simply as another family form.

Statistics Canada defines family in the following way: “a family is a social unit consisting of members who are related to each other by blood, marriage, common-law relationship, or adoption” (Statistics Canada, 2012c). In 2006, there were just over 8.5 million family households in Canada; this represented nearly seventy percent of the population. This statistic demonstrates that although family forms are changing, the family remains valued in Canada. The family needs to be acknowledged as an institution that is continuously evolving.

The overall structure of coupled unions and the family are shifting away from marriage and the nuclear family (Riedmann et al, 2003). Canadian society reflects diverse family forms and marital status, which need to be recognized equally.

Impact on Women and Men: How it Differs

Both men and women have been exposed and have responded to some phenomenon that has resulted in both sexes postponing marriage. In 2008, men married at an average age of thirty-one while women were marrying on average at age twenty-nine (Statistics Canada, 2012c). It is at age thirty that people start to feel uncomfortable with remaining single (Cargan, 2007). The consistent age difference between first marriages for men and women is symbolic of the separate pressures both sexes experience to marry. Furthermore, the age gap between men and women is reflective of the clear gender roles that are assigned to each sex.

The institutional age of marriage has increased as in the past women were expected to marry in their early twenties when they were in their prime for child bearing (Doyle & Paludi, 1995). Motherhood and wifhood are two of the most dominant gender roles that are assigned to women; women who fill these roles are generally perceived as feminine (Gordon, 1994). On the other hand, masculinity is typically associated with success, toughness and

bravery (Doyle & Paludi, 1995). This is not to suggest that being a husband and father is not central to a man's identity, as they are – but the prescribed gender roles for men are more individualistic. In the past, men delayed marriage because they needed to secure suitable employment first so that they would be able to fulfill their role as a breadwinner (Doyle & Paludi, 1995). The primary gender roles for women were (and to some degree still are) to be a wife and mother (Doyle & Paludi, 1995). Therefore, women were typically marrying younger and were usually marrying men who were at least a couple years older and were secured in employment (Doyle & Paludi, 1995). It was not socially acceptable for women to work or be the breadwinner of their family, unless it was during the war. For that reason, women in many ways were financially strapped if they did not have a partner who could support them. However, as education and employment have become increasingly important to both men *and* women, marriage is postponed (Kimmel & Holler, 2011).

The link between femininity and becoming a wife and mother increases pressure on women to marry. As a result, women are scrutinized and judged harshly when they have reached a certain age and have not yet married or found a serious partner. The harsh realities regarding marital status faced by women is evident by identifying the common names and stereotypes of singles. For example, single women have been called an 'old maid' or a 'spinster'; while a single man is called a 'bachelor'. It is crucial to acknowledge that women experience a greater pressure to marry and are scrutinized to a greater degree when they do not marry as compared to men. The negativity tied to single women is in part due to history, patriarchy and gender roles that have not yet evolved. An emphasis on gender will be recognized in the data chapter. Due to the scope of this project, this research explores the overall presentation of how marital status is presented in film. Further research would benefit

by looking specifically at gender and how gender is used in relation to marital status in the mass media.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

Ideology

Ideology is a theoretical tool that is used regularly in the social sciences and is central to this research project. It has been identified as a highly complex theoretical tool, which has several definitions that has been subject to regular debate as the meaning has been reconsidered over time (Dijk, 1998; Eagleton, 1991; Lassen et al., 2006). For this reason, ideology seems to be a ‘fuzzy’ concept that is difficult to define. In simple terms, ideology is “a set of ideas that explain or justify some aspect of social reality” (Lauer et al, 2006:7). This simple definition implies that ideology is indicative of a way of thinking and understanding one’s surroundings and reality.

Ideology is often tied back to Marx and Engels and focuses’ around discussions of power and dominance (Dijk, 1998). Eagleton (1991) describes ideology as a process through which meaning and values are created in social life. It represents a sum of ideas or beliefs that signify the identity of a specific group (Eagleton, 1991). A profound group identity is established through these ideas and functions to direct power to particular social groups.

Drawing from Eagleton’s (1991) definitions it is evident that ideology involves creating ideas, beliefs and values of a specific group, which function to control the distribution of power. Although scholars have acknowledged an abundant existence of definitions, Eagleton (1991) identifies one definition that has persisted as dominant. The combination of a specific belief systems and power are located at the core of an ideology (Eagleton, 1991). Power and belief systems are incredibly significant because it is these components that make ideology such an influential tool in shaping social beliefs.

Ideology is considered a means of “*legitimizing* the power of a dominant social group or class” (Eagleton, 1991:5). In this statement, Eagleton argues that the power of respective social groups or classes is deeply connected in and some ways sustained through ideology. Evidently, ideology is exceptionally powerful and has the ability to shape social thought.

Eagleton (1991) states that for an ideology to flourish it must be considered legitimate. Therefore, it is through the process of legitimation that an ideology is able to establish its power. This process of legitimation involves six approaches; these will be explained in the following passage.

A dominant power may legitimate itself by *promoting* beliefs and values congenial to it; *naturalizing* and *universalizing* such beliefs so as to render them self-evident and apparently inevitable; *denigrating* ideas which might challenge it; *excluding* rival forms of thought, perhaps by some unspoken but systematic logic; and *obscuring* social reality in ways convenient to itself. (Eagleton, 1991:5-6).

The six strategies identified by Eagleton are essential to the survival of popular ideologies. Each strategy plays a fundamental role in sustaining the dominant position of an ideology. The process of legitimation is major because it functions to create social norms (Dijk, 1998). Dijk (1998) explains that as social groups have their own belief system, a system through which other beliefs can be judged and interpreted is established. If all ‘other’ beliefs or values are viewed through a specific lens, there will likely be discrepancies between the two. The latter in this case will be marginalized and recognized as contrasting the normal.

Prior to discussing ideology in relation to marriage, it must be established that ideologies are directly linked to the socialization of mass society. Lauer et al. (2006) describe

socialization as “the process by which an individual learns to participate in a social group” (p. 349). Socialization therefore reflects the progression of individuals as they acquire the skills and knowledge to participate in society. Because ideologies are implicit of certain belief systems, ideologies are inescapable. In everyday talk and interaction, are ideologies (Dijk, 1998). Therefore, ideologies are also present within institutions. This is noteworthy because institutions contribute to the establishment of society and evidently have an incredible influence on individuals (Kimmel & Holler, 2011). Through conversation and any sort of interpretation, individuals encounter various belief systems. People eventually learn that certain individuals or certain groups of individuals maintain specific beliefs (ideologies) (Dijk, 1998). Because ideologies determine how individuals are socialized, dominant ideologies must be critically analyzed. It is crucial to consider which social groups are being served by dominant ideologies and what the specific distribution of power means for members of society.

Ideology is tightly linked to tradition. According to Sztompka (1993), a major function of tradition is to confirm the existence of various ways of life by constructing them as legitimate. Therefore, ways of life that vary from tradition or a norm are subject to diverse judgments. Major institutions such as churches or political parties are profoundly grounded in their particular beliefs (Dijk, 1998). The circulation of ideological beliefs of major institutions is often exposed through some public form of communication such as attending mass (Dijk, 1998). Furthermore, the process of socializing is entrenched with ideological beliefs because members of society learn through institutions.

The ideology of marriage and family is central to this research project. Evidently, understanding the ideology of marriage and family and the power it has is necessary while

examining how marital status is portrayed in films. Each of the six strategies discovered by Eagleton (1991) are present in the ideology of marriage and family. They will be identified and explored below.

The ideology of marriage and family entails several aspects, which *promote* marriage as a means to achieve happiness, acquire an adequate family life, and obtain an elevated social status within society, etc. (DePaulo & Morris, 2005). The ideology of marriage and family does this by exuding the notion that “*just about everybody wants to marry, and just about everybody does*” (DePaulo & Morris, 2005:57). By believing that marriage is for everybody, the ideology of marriage and family *universalizes* marriage. By endlessly promoting marriage as a requirement, remaining single is increasingly viewed as undesirable (*denigrating*) for individuals (DePaulo & Morris, 2005). Marriage can be delayed or postponed but eventually, one is expected to settle down and marry (Cargan, 2007). The persistence and dominating position of the ideology of marriage and family reinforces marriage as a normalized event in major institutions such as the family. As marriage is normalized the ideology of marriage and family is able to remain uncontested and even unrecognized. The ideology of marriage and family is representative of traditional familial values, which would not be problematic if it merely symbolized an option instead of a standard and something to acquire. The normalization of marriage inevitably leads to the *naturalization* of marriage, which stabilizes the power of the ideology.

The ideology of marriage and family remains strong, yet unrecognized. This is meaningful because it is unrecognized within major institutions and consequently functions to socialize individuals (Fleras, 2011). The ideology of marriage and family and particularly the institution of marriage are entrenched within laws, policies, religion and the cultural

imagination (DePaulo, 2006). Furthermore, although there are several diverse life trajectories that are attainable in contemporary society, marriage prevails as a powerful cultural norm (Gordon, 1994; Hackstaff, 1999; Reynolds, 2008; Riedmann et al., 2003). Simply by observing some classic Disney films such as *Beauty and the Beast*, *Snow White*, *Sleeping Beauty*, etc., the importance of marriage is detectable. In particular, a study of Disney films found that marriage and children are conveyed as a component to the regular path for characters (Tanner et al., 2003). It is probable that Disney films contribute to a child's cultural understanding of families (Tanner et al., 2003). A primary life course is advertised through the narrative.

The unrecognized presence of this specific ideology is common with all ideologies. Eagleton (1991) states that a noteworthy side of the ideology debate is that ideology is concerned with "ideas of true and false cognition, with ideology as illusion, distortion and mystification" (p.3). This statement is significant because it suggests that beliefs regarding marriage may not be completely objective, but are shaped by the ideology.

Ideologies have a fundamental role in maintaining idealistic and dominant positions of specific social groups. Moreover, since ideologies are entrenched within institutions, they also become primary material in socialization processes. As a result, marriage is encouraged through socialization as normative and an expected part of life. By establishing marriage as a norm, it becomes a superior status because it is considered something that individuals are supposed to achieve. When measured against the norm, remaining single or becoming single becomes increasingly undesirable and positioned as an inferior status. Remaining single is not something to be chosen, ideologically that is. This component to the ideology of marriage and family is *exclusive* to being anything but married. As identified by Eagleton

(1991), exclusion is another form of legitimating the power of an ideology. The ideology of marriage and family plays such a leading role in normalizing marriage as something that *should* occur in life that individuals often fail to question whether or not marriage is something that they would actually like to participate in, and instead know that marriage is something that *will happen*, thus marriage becomes inevitable (*universal*).

The ideology of marriage and family underlines the notion that everybody wishes to marry and everybody should get married and fundamentally marriage is the best option. This ideology is noticeable in language and the way that marriage is discussed. For example, declining rates of marriage in Canada are acknowledged as a postponement of marriage instead of opting out. The failure to recognize an alteration in beliefs regarding marriage denigrates ideas that defy the ideology. This enables an ideology to remain dominant in its circulation and power. The notion that marriage is being postponed is implicit of the dominant expectation that marriage is a fundamental phase in the life course: that marriage is supposed to happen (Arnett, 2004; Clark, 2007; DePaulo & Morris, 2005) and that it is inevitable (*naturalization*). This is significant because ideologies are belief systems and become forms of knowledge, which are without a doubt internalized by society thereby situating marriage a normal and anticipated phase in life.

In promoting the higher status of marriage, the ideology of marriage and family exerts the belief that alternatives to marriage are undesirable, which *denigrates* and *excludes* 'other' marital statuses. Unmistakably a dichotomy is created, which serves to uphold and legitimate the power associated with marriage. This ideology puts forth the belief that the first and best option is marriage, while *obscuring* any rationale for remaining single. The ideology of marriage and family and the dichotomy have a mutual relationship, both relying on each

other to remain grounded. The ideology continues to exercise power by excluding, obscuring, denigrating, etc. any status except marriage, while the dichotomy reinforces the beliefs produced through the ideology of marriage and family. While power and beliefs are rooted in ideologies, exclusion and marginalization of other beliefs are inevitable and discrimination is common. Singlism is a form of discrimination, which is directly linked to the ideology of marriage and family.

Discrimination

Discrimination is defined as the “arbitrary, unfavorable treatment of the members of some social group” (Lauer et al, 2006:151). This definition indicates that particular social groups in society are treated harshly based on their membership to a specific social unit. Discrimination and ideology share a profound link. Together, they reinforce each other by their very nature. Ideologies are reinforced and strengthened by discriminatory actions such as excluding or perceiving people in a negative manner merely because they fit into a certain social group. In the case of a certain individual or group being excluded, marginalization is typically justified by *something* that is grounded in the specific ideology or belief system. Therefore, the belief system that is promoted through an ideology serves to make discrimination against social groups legitimate. Racism, for example is justified through a ‘natural difference’ between social groups and their “blood, soil or innate characteristics” (Dijk, 1998:256). In this way, racist groups produce a belief system through which they justify the ‘difference’ between groups. Evidently, there is a link between ideology and discrimination.

Discrimination against singles is not an exception. Singlism is a contemporary term that has been used to describe “the twenty-first century problem that has no name” (DePaulo,

2006). This problem has been identified as a form of discrimination, stigma and prejudice against singles. Singles are labeled as deviant because they reject social norms (marriage) (Cargan, 2007). However, the degree of discrimination that singles experience is determined by their reason of being single. For example, single because of divorce is not judged as harshly as never married because divorced individuals attempted to follow their anticipated life trajectory (Cargan, 2007). Singlism differs from other forms of discrimination such as racism or sexism as the normalcy associated with marriage and serious coupling allows singlism to go unnoticed. Singlism is embedded within the norms and culture of Canadian society and in several ways shapes social interactions between individuals. Discrimination against singles often occurs in subtle ways that undermine that the choice to be single is a legitimate life decision.

Who exactly is considered as single? There are two definitions of single that have been identified in previous literature. The first is a legal definition, which entails that people are single if they are not legally married (DePaulo, 2011). Therefore, individuals who are divorced, widowed, or always singles fall into the category of singles. The legal definition is useful in categorizing people based on their lawful marital status. However, the legal definition leaves a grey area regarding individuals whom are in relationships, yet are not married. The second definition is socially single. This concept highlights those whom according to the law are single, yet are in relationships. Individuals may legally be considered single but may in fact be in a committed and long-term relationship. Socially single is determined by society, often by the answers of the following questions: are you in a romantic relationship? If yes, is it a serious and long-term relationship? Do you live together,

etc. (DePaulo, 2011)?¹ To be clear, singlism is a form of stereotyping, discrimination and stigma that is frequently experienced by individuals whom are not married or occupied in a serious relationship. Moreover, seriously coupled individuals who choose to refrain from marriage may fall victim to greater degrees of stereotyping than married couples because official marriage is the norm and accordingly is the most desirable marital status. For this reason, marriage has been described as a ‘gold standard’ that people are striving for (DePaulo, 2006).

The notion of singlism encompasses the idea that individuals whom are single experience various forms of stigmatization, discrimination and stereotyping *because* they are single (DePaulo, 2006). Various factors determine the degree of stigmatization, discrimination and stereotyping, which is why an intersectional approach is beneficial. Referring back to the six strategies identified by Eagleton (1991); marginalizing and excluding others is a mechanism used to strengthen the power exerted by the ideology. Singles have been found to be economically disadvantaged, socially disadvantaged, subject to negative perceptions and overall, are viewed in a negative manner as compared to their married neighbors (Chasteen, 1994; Choi, 1996; DePaulo & Morris, 2005). Each of the listed examples can be drawn back to Eagleton’s (1991) strategies to legitimating the power of an ideology. In Canadian society, singlehood has negative connotations due to the persistence of the ideology.

The link between ideologies and discrimination mirrors the association between the ideology of marriage and family and singlism. Singles resist the anticipated life course by

¹ The social definition proves more useful in this study because it is useful in naming individuals as socially coupled or socially single.

choosing to forego marriage and remain single. The prospect and idealistic status of marriage constructs singlehood as inferior because singles are perceived as missing something fundamental to a complete life. Singlism differs from other forms of discrimination or prejudice because instead of singles experiencing hate, as occurs in racism for example – singles are often approached with feelings of pity (DePaulo & Morris, 2005). As mentioned, the significance of pity being directed towards singles is reflective of a belief that they are lacking something significant in life – in this case, marriage or being involved in a serious relationship (DePaulo, 2006). These beliefs are supported by the mass media by failing to represent alternative life paths. It is important to note that simply calling singlehood an ‘alternate life path’, implies a diversion from the norm and affirming the ideology of marriage and family. Nevertheless, the mass media broadcasts primarily mainstream ideas, which means that remaining single is not presented.

The implications of the ideology of marriage and family are quite apparent when the ideology is subject to analysis. However, the ideology is often overlooked. Therefore its presence within major institutions is frequently unnoticed and studies regarding singles are commonly flawed (DePaulo & Morris, 2005). Quite a few reports pertaining to levels of happiness or satisfaction argue that married individuals are generally in better positions than singles. For example, Stutzer et al (2004), argue that marriage constitutes a relationship that is founded on feelings of love, gratitude and recognition, security, and material rewards. Furthermore, married individuals are believed to be in a superior position compared to singles because they have increased earnings, improved physical and psychological health, better sexual lives, their children will achieve more, etc. (Stutzer et al, 2004). These arguments are common when discussing the benefits of marriage and clearly marginalize and

exclude singles. These studies are often problematic because they generalize entire social groups as homogeneous thereby failing to recognize diversity within each respective group. DePaulo (2006) acknowledged that studies regarding salary demonstrate overt discrimination against singles. For example, married men have been found to earn increased salaries in comparison to single men. An elevated salary typically leads to an increasingly valuable retirement package (DePaulo, 2006). Therefore, married men are likely to earn a higher salary in addition to securing a superior retirement package as compared to singles (DePaulo, 2006). A pay difference between married and single men is estimated at twenty six percent (DePaulo, 2006). Compensation packages and healthcare are two other areas where singles may be discriminated against (DePaulo, 2006). For example, doctors may be more likely to provide superior care to patients whom are assumed to have a close family (DePaulo, 2006).

DePaulo & Morris (2005) acknowledge that because the ideology of marriage and family is entrenched within society and science, the idealistic position of marriage becomes ingrained within the foundation of research projects and academic studies. As a result, from the initial stages, studies are often saturated with ideas that marginalize and discriminate against singles.

Any form of discrimination is linked to existing ideologies and the belief systems that they carry. Marital status is a category through which individuals experience discrimination, stereotyping, prejudice and stigmatization. For this reason, ideologies play a substantial role in determining the organization of a social hierarchy. In this sense ideologies also constitute a dominant train of thought by establishing logics of discrimination. DePaulo and Morris (2005) support this statement by identifying singles as a target for discrimination. Singles are believed to be lonely, shy, unhappy, insecure and inflexible (DePaulo & Morris, 2005;

Stutzer & Frey, 2006). While on the other hand, coupled individuals are viewed as happy, loving and secure (DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Stutzer & Frey, 2006). These stereotypes establish a ground to negatively perceive singles. In addition, inferior stereotypes reinforce the idea that single lack something major. Once singlism is identified as a form of discrimination, the overwhelming persistence of singlism is impossible to overlook, especially because the forms of stigma and stereotyping are quite pervasive.

Media

The media is a major institution that functions as a very powerful mode of socialization (Fleras, 2011). Specifically, the mass media plays a main role in shaping peoples perceptions of reality (Fleras, 2011). On previously noted, institutions are heavily entrenched with ideologies. This is particularly significant because the media typically misrepresents minority groups whom are viewed as diverse or different from the norm thereby upholding dominant ideologies (Fleras, 2011). Mainstream media has been accused of persuading the common people to “*seeing like the media, as if the media was untouched by bias or perspective*” (Fleras, 2011:ix). This quote establishes that although diversity is becoming more common in the media, the primary content and messages within mainstream media represent biased representations (Fleras, 2011). Explicitly, the media is centered on ideas and images that worship the normalcy linked to whiteness, Eurocentrism, secularism, heterosexism and androcentrism (Fleras, 2011). Gerbner (1998) takes the argument further by acknowledging that broadcasting is incredibly concentrated, homogenized and globalized. The homogenization and circulation of broadcasting is problematic because it incorporates dominant ideologies into the material. Lull (2000) indicates that there is a direct link between the mass media and ideologies.

Ideology is organized thought – sets of values, orientations, and predispositions that are expressed through technologically mediated and interpersonal communication.

Ideologies are “internally coherent *ways of thinking*. They are *points of view* that may or may not be “true”... (Lull, 2000: 11).

As previously discussed, the existence and distribution of ideologies cause discrimination. The continuation of ideologies in the mass media threatens basic social equality because it is a primary mode of socialization.

The ideologies that are presented in the mass media serve and promote a dominant group or status within society (Lull, 2000). It is noteworthy that individuals of society create and organize the dominant themes of the media. As a result, regular people contribute to the reproduction and mass circulation of ideologies. Advertising is used to explicitly and implicitly express ideologies as standard, which normalizes them in regular thought and behaviour (Lull, 2000). Advertising is fixed with traditional and stereotypical depictions of men and women. With constant use of ideologies, inequality is reproduced and conventional representations of men and women are reinforced as normal (Kimmel, 2008). The reproduction of traditional marriage values is another mechanism used to exclude alternatives to marriage.

The association between the mass media and ideologies is present and significant in terms of shaping public opinion (Lull, 2000; Signorielli, 1991). As content from the media is absorbed the audience understands the material as realistic. Importantly, Fleras (2011) describes today’s world as a “media- dependent world”. This is extremely problematic because a world depends on the media is simultaneously relying on the realities that are

created through the media. Fleras (2011) explains the significance of the media in the following quote:

As institutions of socialization, media do more than influence and shape. More accurately, they are reality, because in a media-dependent world, where there is no social reality outside of representations (symbols, images, narratives), media constructions are instrumental in creating those images that circumscribe people's lived realities (p. 194).

This quote symbolizes the degree of power that the media maintains in shaping public opinion. Evidently, the media possesses substantial influence in persuading the public. Subsequently, individuals absorb these messages and anticipate situations that they otherwise may not have any experience with (Fleras, 2011).

Intersectionality

As discussed, ideologies are belief systems that are specific to a particular social group. Evidently, discrimination results from various belief systems that exclude 'others'. Intersectionality is a valuable theoretical tool because it recognizes the various dimensions of identity (Mehrotra, 2010). Intersectionality is defined as "the relationship among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formation" (Kimmel & Holler, 2011:135). Intersectionality is frequently used in gender studies, women's studies and feminist work because it is considerably useful in the analysis of gender relations. Incorporating several dimensions of identity in this study is necessary because expectations of marriage vary depending on the age, sex, gender, religion, etc. of the individual. For the purpose of this study, intersectionality will be used to incorporate mainly aspects of gender,

age, sex and sexual preference². For example, in Canada there is abundant pressure put on both men and women to marry at some point in their lives (Riedmann et al, 2003), although, it is crucial to acknowledge that men and women encounter this pressure at different times in their life and in distinctive forms.

The ideology of marriage and family affects both men and women differently. For both sexes, the ideology of marriage and family creates pressure to marry. Women are subject to greater scrutiny when it comes to marriage or settling down with somebody (Doyle & Paludi, 1995). The stereotypical names for single men (i.e. bachelor) and single women (i.e. spinster) are overwhelmingly telling of how single men and women are perceived. DePaulo (2006) supports this statement by arguing that it is more acceptable for men to remain single for a longer period of time than it is for women. This belief is visible in the reality that women have on average married at a younger age as compared to men (Statistics Canada, 2012c). Along with changing times, temporal expectations for marriage have also evolved and pressure to marry is delayed until a later age for both men (31) and women (29). In 1988, Jessie Bernard argued that institutional timing for marriage was linked to childbearing age, arguing that marriage should occur in the early twenties (Doyle & Paludi, 1995). Today, it is ideologically suitable for individuals to delay marriage until they are economically stable and educated. Cargan (2007) argues that the majority of individuals expect to marry and eventually do marry by age thirty.

Clearly, traditional gender roles are assigned to men and women from a very young age. Gender roles are advertised to both men and women from birth through various forms of

² Ideally, this study would be able to include an increased amount of dimensions, however it is beyond the scope of the research. The data chapter briefly identifies additional dimensions of identity that are present and important to consider as well.

socialization, particularly school, parents, peers, and the mass media (Kimmel & Holler, 2011). Gender is a large predictor in determining what roles individuals will be socialized to occupy. For instance, masculinity and femininity are learned quite early through the clothes we wear as babies and the toys we are given to play with (Doyle & Paludi, 1995).

In terms of marriage, feminine gender roles are profoundly linked to the marriage mandate. The marriage mandate reflects the ideological beliefs that marriage is a “rite of passage” for most women into adulthood and a form of satisfying societal feminine roles (Doyle & Paludi, 1995:95). The marriage mandate is embedded within institutions and is simply reinforced by the ideology of marriage and family. For this reason, women experience a great deal of pressure to marry because it is directly linked to their womanhood. Marriage is not a critical component to masculine gender roles, however men are ideologically responsible for being protectors and providers for their families (Doyle & Paludi, 1995). As a result, marriage and family is also a clear expectation for men.

Evidently, men and women have quite diverse experiences. Intersectionality provides a tool to investigate some of the dissimilar experiences between men and women. This is significant because dimensions of one's identity influence where they are situated in relation to an ideology. Furthermore, an intersectional approach is crucial to distinguish how each gender is affected by discrimination. Ideology and discrimination reinforce each other through their very existence. Furthermore, the mainstream media is a mechanism used to promote dominant ideologies and discriminatory material. Intersectionality allows for adequate analysis of how ideology, discrimination and the mainstream media use the ideology of marriage.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this study is to examine if and how marital status is presented in contemporary films. Specifically, this research project seeks to explore modern films in relation to ideological values regarding marital status. For example, questioning if recent films present marriage as an inevitable event. Alternatively, are films representative of the diverse nature of Canadian families today? This research project is merely a starting point in this area of study. There is a profound link between broadcasting and ideological beliefs, including the ideology of marriage and family (Fleras, 2010, Signorielli, 1991). Most importantly though, there is a lack of research pertaining to exploring the ideology of marriage and family in the mass media (Signorielli, 1991). Because little research has been conducted regarding the significance of marriage in contemporary films, this research project simply acts as a commencement to discovering a general image and patterns that may arise. The research consists of performing a content analysis on nine top grossing romantic comedies that were released in 2010.

This chapter includes a detailed explanation of the sample; describing how and why top grossing romantic comedies from 2010 were chosen for analysis. Subsequently, the chapter will define content analysis as a technique and why it is most useful for this study. Subsequently, the paper outlines a detailed overview of performing content analysis.

Sample

The purpose of the research was to establish if there was a link between the ideology of marriage and family and the latest films. For this reason, it was important to choose a sample that was recent and included films containing relationships as a central theme. To ensure this, films that were released by their production company as romantic comedies were selected. It

was beneficial to include films that were widely viewed by an audience in order to gauge the material that is communicated through an agent of socialization.

Attaining a sample that was inclusive to each of the criteria was challenging. After conducting preliminary research, it was evident that there are very few resources (written and online) that contain a complete list of films organized by year, theme and earnings. The selection of movies chosen for this research project were retrieved from a website called *The Numbers*, which did identify a list of films based on the required criteria. *The Numbers* receives up-to-date data directly from producing studios and is therefore a credible source (Information Office, *The Numbers*, July 27th, 2012). This website contains box office data, information on movie stars and other miscellaneous notes regarding movies (<http://www.the-numbers.com/market/2010/RomanticComedy.php>). Information on *The Numbers* website is organized under various headings, one of which is 'Market Analysis'. The section entitled 'Genres' identifies top grossing genres, the number of movies produced under each genre between 1995-2012, and other information. Romantic comedies are ranked as the sixth top-grossing genre between 1995-2012 (*The Numbers*. Top Grossing Genres 1995 to 2012. Last accessed: June 29th 2012). Information on any genre can be collected simply by selecting the specific genre. This website was especially useful because after navigating to the page specific to romantic comedies, all films classifications are organized by year. Therefore, after discovering that *The Numbers* contained the required data, creating a list became more manageable.

The Numbers was the only available database that included a list of films based on earnings, genre and year. The organization and information located on this website is similar to that found on *Internet Movie Database* (IMDB), which has been used in previous studies

to gather a sample of visual material (see Zoonen, 2007). *The Numbers* retrieves the majority of their data directly from production companies. Data regarding older films is typically retrieved from *Variety* magazine, which receive their data from a company that specializes in box office statistics (Rentrak) (Information Officer, *The Numbers*, July 26th, 2012). The films chosen were based on the year they were released, the genre they belonged to and the amount of money that each produced. The earnings of each film are a combined total for the United States and Canada (Information Officer, *The Numbers*, July 26th, 2012). Therefore, the films with the highest earnings were likely consistent in both countries. As a result, one can assume that the content from the sample is communicated to a large audience. As a result, the content requires examination. The preliminary arrangements for this project started in 2011 when the most recent and complete list of films was from 2010. In addition, collecting the sample was feasible as the films were readily available on DVD. Therefore, each of the nine films were among the most recent produced and released in Canada and the United States.

Films that were released in 2010 were selected because the objective of this project required a sample that expressed themes from *recent* films. The aim of this research is to identify recurring themes and patterns pertaining to the depiction of marital status in current films. In order to do so, the most current and attainable list of films were from 2010. Using the latest films is significant because the material represents the most up-to-date data that can be used. As a result, the roles played by characters and the dominant ideas that are revealed in the movies represent the most current content of romantic comedies. Mortimer (2010) argues that the nature of romantic comedies evolves over the years, yet nonetheless remains a popular choice of film that incorporates a central narrative of romance. There is often a belief

that contemporary materials produced by the mass media embrace and promote diversity (Fleras, 2011; Mortimer, 2010). For example, *Juno* is a film that highlights a story of a pregnant teen-ager, or *The Back-up Plan* features a single woman perceived to be in her mid thirties who decide to go with artificial insemination to have children before it is too late. Fleras (2011) argues that dominant ideologies remain powerful in the media. Therefore, although diverse representations such as single or young moms may be included, they are likely portrayed as straying from the norm. Fleras (2011) states that reality is constructed through an “institutional point of view (i.e. predominantly straight, white, middle-aged, middle-class, male) (p. 36). The institutional point of view is formed as “natural and normal”. Diversity in the media is therefore conveyed in relation to the norm. Therefore, although the media may include diverse representations, they are influenced by what is perceived to be normal and natural. In order to establish a relationship between current marital status in society and how it is portrayed in films, it is most relevant to use films that were released in 2010.

Secondly, the sample contains films that have been categorized as ‘Romantic Comedies’. Films labeled as ‘Romantic Comedies’ were chosen entirely on their placement in this genre. Because romance is a primary theme in romantic comedies, each film would theoretically include premises regarding marital status. Mortimer (2010) summarizes romantic comedies as films that outline the advancement of a relationship and complete with a happily ever after ending between two people. It has also been noted that a variety of genres include romance as an overarching theme, however because little has been analyzed in this area of study, this project will look solely at romantic comedies. Selecting romantic comedies guarantees that relationships are included in the films. Because relationships and

romance are central to romantic comedies, marriage is likely a topic of discussion in the films. In this sense, this genre was purposely chosen to ensure that the sample contained the required data to complete adequate research.

Thirdly, the sample was chosen from a list containing top grossing romantic comedies in 2010. The top nine films were chosen based on the following criteria. Each of the films grossed over twenty-five million dollars in 2010, which reflects the vast amount of people who viewed the films in merely one year. Films that were produced and released in 2009 but continued to earn through 2010 were also included in this list. However, among the top ten grossing solely one film had been produced in 2009 and was excluded from the sample. Although this film (*Its Complicated*) ranked third on the list, it was omitted from the sample based of its time of production. Another notable limitation to the sample is that it does not include any independent films. The exclusion of independent films was not done purposely, but was not present in the list of films comprised by *The Numbers*.

A total of nine films were chosen for analysis. Each was produced in 2010, is categorized as a romantic comedy, earned over twenty-five million dollars and was not produced independently. Top grossing films were chosen because their earnings suggest that a large audience viewed the films. Each of the films has been recorded as selling over three million tickets. In addition, only two of the films were rated 'R' while the rest were either PG or PG-13. Because of the modest ratings these films are available to young teens as well as adults thereby reaching a diverse audience. Most importantly, many people were exposed to the major themes presented in the films, which is central to this research. The nine films come from a variety of production companies. Therefore, the sample is symbolic of the overall messages and themes that are present in contemporary films.

Importantly the sample does not reflect all recent films, films produced in 2010 or even films categorized as Romantic Comedies. The sample is restrictive as it is reduced to nine films belonging to the same genre, but as mentioned this research project is simply a starting point and the purpose is to explore if/where the ideology regarding family fits into recent films.

Romantic Comedies - 2010			
Film	2010 Gross Earning	Rating	Tickets Sold
Valentine's Day	\$110,485,654	PG-13	14,003,251
The Bounty Hunter	\$67,061,228	PG-13	8,499,522
Life as We Know It	\$52,886,508	PG-13	6,787,901
The Back-up Plan	\$37,490,007	PG-13	6,702,979
When in Rome	\$32,680,633	PG-13	4,142,032
She's Out of My League	\$32,010,860	R	4,057,143
The Switch	\$27,758,465	PG-13	3,518,183
Leap Year	\$25,918,920	PG	3,285,034
How Do You Know?	\$25,040,894	R	3,173,751

Table 1: Romantic Comedies - 2010

Source: The Numbers, 2012.

Content Analysis – What is content analysis?

The films were examined through a content analysis. Content analysis is a technique that is frequently used in the social sciences as an analytical tool (Berg, 2007). Content analysis is useful in exploring the social world and establishes what norms and values are present (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). Mainly, content analysis is useful in analyzing various forms of human communication, such as text or other cultural products (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007). This research method is unique in the way that the data already exists; it is merely a matter of examining it (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007).

Content analysis is a mode of analyzing and interpreting data, while considering what the content implies or symbolizes overall (Del Balso & Lewis, 2008). Content analysis is

defined as, “a careful, detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort to identify patterns, themes, biases and meanings” (Berg, 2007:304). A content analysis can be executed on anything that can be transformed into text (Berg, 2007). Furthermore, analyzing content is useful because it can be conducted qualitatively and from several theoretical perspectives (Hesse-Bitty & Leavy, 2007). Relevant dialogue from these films was recorded in a precise manner since the scripts of such recent films were not available. Because content analysis is a flexible technique, it is the most efficient technique to conduct this research. In addition, categories of classification can be based exclusively on the topic, provide a convenient and systematic method to collect data accurately.

Significantly, this method of analysis is useful to identify what messages are produced by the mass media. The content of films and all mass media profoundly influence the socialization of individuals. As a result, it is critical to actively question what content is broadcasted by the media. Once the content has been identified it is then crucial to consider what beliefs and values are embedded within that specific content. This critical thinking facilitates a space to consider what the implications of the material are for the public. Critical analysis is central to content analysis and demonstrates why it is a beneficial tool to use in research.

It is noteworthy to consider that characters in movies are fictional. Actors and actresses play roles that were created by screenwriters. This is significant because individuals are creating material that influences a massive amount of people. That being said, the conversations in the films are not representative of *real* conversations between individuals, however because these roles are creations, it is evident that ideologies have been internalized

to some degree by the scriptwriters who are then promoting the ideology through popular film. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2007) concur in the following quote “The texts and objects that groups of humans produce are embedded with larger ideas those groups have, whether shared or contested, such as ideas about sex and gender” (p. 229). Therefore, although films are constructed and are not precise imitations of real life, the content cannot be completely separated from real life. In addition, the media is an incredibly strong socializing agent and therefore requires analysis. Content analysis was initially used under the notion that people can learn about our social world by studying the material that is created (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2007).

What are the stages of content analysis?

In the sixth edition of *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, Berg (2007) introduces a framework to soundly perform a qualitative content analysis. The model involves seven steps, which when obeyed lead to accurately performing a content analysis. The initial phase of the model begins with addressing the purpose of the research by establishing a research question. The objective of this research is to explore how marital status is portrayed in films that were released in 2010. In particular, this research seeks to examine how ideology is depicted, how singles and coupled individuals are delivered to the audience and what these representations entail for individuals in society. The question that requires attention is: How is marital status illustrated in top grossing romantic comedies that were released in 2010? An additional theme that is equally close to this research is seeking to explore the association between marriage and family; all the while, keeping in mind Canadian demographics. For example, what familial structure is most often presented in films? What does this structure entail? How are married individuals portrayed in comparison

to singles? In short, the main characters are often faced with overcoming obstacles to be together (Mortimer, 2010). For example, a primary obstacle in romantic comedies is the ‘wrong’ partner who temporarily prevents the couple from pursuing their relationship (Mortimer, 2010). These questions provide a basis from which the initial phases of the research design were established.

Once the research question has been established the second stage involves determining analytic categories or sociological constructs. The analytic categories or sociological constructs stem from reading through a literature review and through considering what themes are directly linked to the topic of inquiry. The specific categories are often pulled directly from the data that is being analyzed such as from field notes or transcripts (Berg, 2007). Because this research uses motion pictures for the data, central themes regarding the topic have been derived directly from literature.

The analytic categories for this research project include various marital statuses, marriage as an institution and the predetermined life trajectory. Marital status includes the various relationship statuses that are inevitably adopted or imposed on individuals. Being single or married are separate marital statuses that are emphasized as primary themes in romantic comedies. Individuals unavoidably belong to a variety of marital statuses throughout their life. This is significant because each marital status is accompanied by a particular social status. Social statuses vary depending on the nature and details regarding the relationship. A variety of literature suggests that each marital status is ranked within a hierarchy, where being single is the least desirable (DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Gordon, 1994; Hackstaff, 1999). Social status in itself is socially constructed and for this reason it is pertinent to consider marital status as a sociological construct. The narrative surrounding

marital status must be considered to determine if there are links between the characters marital status and their qualities. For example, Cargan (2007) recognizes that singles are described in their relation to marriage, to something they do not have. This research questions whether singles are portrayed as lacking a major from their life. Does it differ for men and women? In order to capture the overarching themes for this research, marital status, marriage as an institution, and the life trajectory are used as analytic categories.

The third step towards completing a content analysis is to spend time reading through the data and pulling out the most relevant themes (Berg, 2007). These are an extension of the analytic categories and are called grounded categories. The analytic categories were broken down into grounded categories that are useful in categorizing the material. The grounded categories are obtained from the data and must have a profound association with the research question (Berg, 2007). During this stage of the content analysis, it is essential to sift through a large amount of the data in order to adequately select what appear to be the most pertinent themes (on the surface) (Berg, 2007). The researcher must also be reminded that the continuous occurrence of a particular theme does not necessary make that idea significant to the topic. It is for this reason why the grounded categories must have at least some link to the research topic. This phase of the analysis is particularly important because the grounded categories act as a preliminary framework that shape how the data is organized and sorted. Therefore, it is imperative that the grounded categories are clearly linked to the research topic.

The grounded categories were selected through the literature and the major themes pertaining to the research question. The grounded categories chosen for this study stemmed from the analytic category of marital status. The categories were initially chosen to be single

and married. However, this pair did not provide a space for individuals who were seriously coupled, yet not married. As a result, 'single' and 'coupled' were chosen as the grounded categories, each being an overarching title of several forms of that status within it. Both categories were divided into four sub categories, which outline possible circumstances that individuals may be experiencing as single or coupled.

The two categories make up the coding system that will be used to classify the raw data into categories. In order to acknowledge various statuses of being single, the category was simplified into four subcategories. Among the categories are: looking, waiting, dating and celebrating. The four subcategories are indicative of the multiple directions that individuals may participate in while single. The first subtype, looking is reflective of characters that are actively portrayed as looking for a partner. The waiting sub category includes individuals that are clearly waiting to find a partner or waiting to be found by a romantic partner. The third sub category is dating. This category reflects individuals who were depicted as dating yet were not portrayed as being in a couple. The last sub category is celebrating. Celebrating refers to characters that are portrayed as content with their singlehood. This subcategory symbolizes individuals as openly defying the norms of the ideology of marriage and family. The second category is 'Seriously coupled, coupled and married', which has four subcategories as well. Among these are resolving, ending, committing and rejecting. Resolving refers to characters that are shown as resolving a committed relationship or in other words trying to make it work. Ending entails characters have decided to end their relationship. The third subcategory, committing refers to couples that are legally committing to each other through marriage or planning to marry in the future. Finally the last subcategory, rejecting includes couples that are rejecting marriage and

choosing to remain committed through common law. Each of the categories and subcategories are directly related to the marital status of individuals. The subcategories include adequate variety that the characters of different relationship statuses can thereby be placed into a category. Sociologically, the categories provide an arena to investigate how various marital statuses are presented through the mass media. After exploring how relationship status is portrayed, the research continues by contemplating what social significance the particular representations entail for society.

The grounded categories were selected based upon their connection to the ideology of marriage and family. As a result, when characters belonging to a specific marital status are depicted in a specific way, it can easily be recorded under its category in the coding system. Various portrayals of each social group (subcategories) provide examples demonstrating how these individuals are presented to the audience. The recorded data can subsequently be scanned and examined for patterns within. Critically assessing the use of the ideology of marriage and family is central to this research project and requires acknowledging how marital status is utilized and presented in film. Keeping with DePaulo and Morris (2005), the ideology of marriage and family recognizes coupled individuals as superior, happier and leading more meaningful lives, while singles are considered in a more negative manner, in particular being unhappy, lonely or lacking something fundamental in their life. Consequently, the indicated categories and their link to the ideology of marriage and family facilitate the identification of how the particular marital groups are displayed.

Once the grounded categories were chosen the fourth stage of Berg's content analysis model was to establish an efficient system by which the data can be arranged into the categories. During the stage, it is imperative to develop objective criteria to classify the data

so that it can be placed correctly. The key to achieving an objective criterion is to develop precise guidelines for the coding system (Berg, 2007). With detailed guidelines, placing data into the coding system is simplified for the researcher because each category possesses a distinct profile that must be mirrored by the data before it can accurately be placed into that category.

The process of developing a systematic and objective criterion through which the data was sorted proved to be a challenge for this research. In order to accurately categorize the data, the research used pieces of conversation that overtly discussed the category. Therefore, content from the films was collected based on its narrative regarding marital status.

Particular examples included segments of conversation or emotional status of characters that was associated with their status in the film. The dialect between characters was chosen as the data in this study because it's meaning is overtly revealed and can therefore be identified without difficulty. In addition, because marital status is a central theme in films, it is frequently approached as a topic of discussion, especially in romantic comedies. Mortimer (2010) reinforces the centrality of marital status by acknowledging that films typically conclude with a happy ending and a couple resolving any issues that had arisen; and finally commit to each other through serious coupling or plans to marry. Conversation that explicitly discussed being 'single' or 'coupled' was extracted and was identified as belonging to one of the categories. Placing the data into one of the grounded categories was at times challenging because the marital status was not always blatantly detectable.

Although the data may not have openly discussed the subcategory, its position could be distinguished based on the content of the conversation. Once marital status was identified, the context in which it was discussed determined if the characters were portrayed in a

discriminatory fashion. The relationship status of the characters in the films was usually verbally stated. If the marital status of the characters was not clearly stated, it was revealed implicitly through behaviour or conversation.

An additional challenge that was presented during this phase of the content analysis was the existence of several romantic relationships in each romantic comedy. The challenge aroused in selecting which relationship (characters) to consider relevant and which to disregard when collecting data. Or in determining how many relationships from each film should be chosen. Significantly, in the majority of films emphasis was placed on one romantic union between characters. In romantic comedies characters often have to overcome an obstacle to be with 'the one' (Mortimer, 2010). In some cases, the obstacle is another person. Therefore, some films include a love triangle. However, this is actually useful because the narrative therefore includes various marital statuses, including being single.

The main relationship or love triangle is the most useful for this research. However, a dominant relationship might not always be distinguishable. For this reason, this project examines the core romantic relationships that are presented in the film. 'Core romantic relationships' have been determined based on the characters involved. Main characters are typically indicated on the DVD case, either by name or by including an expressive photo of the characters. The main characters participate in the most central relationships and are therefore used for the majority of data. This study lacks the depth to examine each romantic relationship that occurs in every film. Therefore, the narrative concerning the primary characters is used as the criteria for which to select increasingly relevant data. An additional point that is noteworthy is that characters often play a role that incorporates numerous marital statuses. For example, the characters may start off single, develop a relationship, end

the relationship, etc. As characters transition through diverse marital statuses they simultaneously evolve as a character. Therefore, choosing to focus on fewer relationships still offers sufficient data to examine, which can easily be classified into the categories.

The preceding stage of the content analysis was to sort the data into the categories. Data was sorted into the predetermined categories. The categories and subcategories were organized into a chart, which allowed the process of gathering and placing data to be manageable. While watching films, quotes were recorded in Microsoft Word. Once the film ended, the notes were revised and the applicable content was added to the coding system, which is identified below. Recording notes while watching the movies was more efficient than immediately placing the data into the chart. It was possible that each film included data that would fit into each subcategory but not expected. Therefore, the data collected represents an overall picture of the material in romantic comedies produced in 2010 and does not necessarily imply that each 2010 film labeled a romantic comedy encompasses these exacts themes and patterns.

	Singles				Seriously Coupled, Coupled, Married			
Films	Looking	Waiting	Dating	Celebrating	Resolving	Ending	Committing	Rejecting
Valentine's Day								
.....								

Each film was viewed twice to ensure that no pertinent data was overlooked. Excel was used to create the coding system and record data. As the data was documented in simplified notes, a coding program such as QDA was unhelpful and unnecessary. Had the scripts been available to the public, using coding software would have been beneficial. As the content from the films was classified into categories, it was systematically reduced to separate units, creating a manageable format for analysis and interpretation. The chart is a coding system

that provides a space where the data can be distinguished from each other based on its categorical placement (Del Balso & Lewis, 2008).

Following Berg's model of content analysis, the sixth step involves considering the general picture that is depicted through the coding system. During this phase of the research the materials were reviewed (watching the films for a second time) and the coding chart was explored for relevant patterns or conflicting findings. Initially, it can be beneficial to begin this stage by identifying how the content fits into the categories (Berg, 2007). Through examining the charts and determining which categories have more or less content could possibly lead to patterns. A tally system can be adopted to record the frequency of themes in order to determine whether or not there is a common occurrence of themes or pattern (Berg, 2007).

Prior to investigating the data for patterns, establishing what constitutes a pattern must be determined. According to Berg (2007) a safe, 'rule of thumb' is to assume that a repetition of three instances can be considered a pattern. For this research project, three similar representations of singles can be considered a pattern. According to Berg (2007), when examining material one incidence may be an accident, while two incidents could be a coincidence. However, when something emerges three times it becomes increasingly likely that the repetition of the subject it is in fact a pattern (Berg, 2007). On the same note, it is equally as important for the researcher to keep in mind that simply because some content consistently occurs it does not necessarily imply the existence of a pattern. For instance, constant representation of married couples does not necessarily symbolize a pattern (Berg, 2007). Yet, three similar portrayals of singles can be considered a pattern. The goal of this research is to detect how marital status was portrayed. The coding system enables the data to

be arranged in a manner, which distinguishes between various marital statuses thereby providing a space where the data can be analyzed in search of patterns in association to the ideology of marriage and family.

An initial concern for this research project was the minimal number of films used in the sample. However, this challenge was overcome as each film is classified as a romantic comedy and the themes that are presented in the films revolve around romance. The completion of this stage entails that the researcher has established an overall understanding and summary of the data by identifying patterns.

The final phase to the content analysis ties the patterns to literature and theory. The patterns that have been exacted from the data are questioned in regards to the literature and theory. The association between the data and the literature must be considered. Are there particular themes from the literature that have been highlighted through the films? Do the films challenge the literature? Does the portrayal of singles generally involve characters that are portrayed as lonely and upset? Or are singles illustrated as content and fulfilled individuals? Reflecting on these types of questions is valuable because it locates how the findings are located in relation to the literature. After recognizing how the data is linked to literature it was considered in terms of the theories.

Consequently, the films were analyzed in their use of ideological values and marginalizing nature. When considering data in relation to the theory, it was measured in regards to the ideology of marriage and family and singlism. Once the content is linked to literature and theory, the last stage continues and subsequently involves an analysis (explanation) of the findings. The analysis encompasses a precise investigation between examining the content and the ideology of marriage and family, singlism, the life course and

central themes that were discussed in the literature review. The analysis offers an explanation as to how various marital statuses are portrayed and speculates what these specific illustrations entail for individuals in society. Explaining the themes, patterns and their meanings followed by investigating the possible implications that stem from the representations is the purpose of Chapter 5, while the data is laid out in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Data

As this thesis demonstrates, contemporary romantic comedy films privilege heterosexual relationships that lead to marriage. Specifically, romantic comedies focus on a love story - a story that involves characters facing down obstacles, including interpersonal tensions, to that love and striving to overcome those obstacles in order to secure a marriage commitment. Often the interpersonal tensions involve a love triangle - with two characters fighting over the same person. Consistently, the love triangle was composed of two men in pursuit of the same woman. The significance of this love triangle is that it reinforces the dynamic of desirable women as coveted, marriageable, and successful in the competitive market of relationships. *She's Out of My League* exceptionally portrays two women in competition for one man. Although the explicit competition between women transcends the narrative that dominated in the other films, this movie retained the privileged position of the quest for marriage.

The previous chapter outlined the framework in which the data were collected and organized. This chapter is dedicated to an examination of the contents found in each category (Single and Seriously coupled), and each subcategory. Excerpts from the films illustrated the different dynamics between 'seriously coupled' and 'single'.

The data show the different treatment of single and married women. Quotes and summaries of specific scenes reinforce the central argument. The 'progressive' path from single status to marriage depicts single characters as 'lacking something fundamental in their lives' and the promise of marriage as a successful personal achievement. The idea that something fundamental was missing was illustrated as characters who were single sought a partner or had friends and family attempt to find a suitable partner for them. This pressure –

explicit or implicit – to look for a partner privileges one life course for women. The exclusivity of the desired outcome for women and the implied restrictions on the interpretations of romance mean that women must find a partner, it must be heterosexual and monogamous, and must lead to marriage.

Films and Central Characters

Prior to examining the data, a brief summary of each film, the central characters and central storyline will be documented.

Valentine's Day is a film that involves several characters and storylines. The central characters in this film that are used for the analysis are Reed and his girlfriend Morley, Reed's best friend Julia and her boyfriend Dr. Harrison Copeland, who failed to tell Julia he was married. The film revolves around Valentine's Day and the pressure and expectations of relationships around this time of year. To summarize, Reed proposes to Morley who accepts, only to break off the engagement. Julia finds out her boyfriend is married and embarrasses him in front of his wife. At the end of the film, Julia and Reed confess their feelings for each other and commit to a relationship.

The Bounty Hunter is a movie about a bounty hunter who is assigned to find his ex-wife. Milo and Nicole are the main characters and are divorced from each other. Once Milo finds his ex-wife, they discuss their relationship, their faults and eventually decide to be together. Milo still takes Nicole to jail, but decides to spend the night with her.

Life as We Know It outlines a story of two individuals who are forced together after they receive custody of their best friends' daughter, Sophie. Messer and Holly are the main characters; each is quite successful and single. After being forced into maintaining a relationship for Sophie, Holly and Messer realize they love each other and commit to raising

Sophie together.

The Back-up Plan outlines a story of a single, successful woman named Zoe who meets the love of her life, Stan, right after she was inseminated. Zoe and Stan break up due to pressure of the pregnancy, but reunite and become engaged at the end of the film.

When in Rome is the story of a single successful woman named Beth who meets her future brother in law, Nick at her sister's wedding. Beth picks coins from the Fontana de Amore and has many suitors pursuing her, including Nick. After finally agreeing to date Nick, Beth falls in love and the film concludes with Beth and Nick getting married.

She's Out of My League outlines the story of a young man named Kirk who is caught between his ex girlfriend Marney and a girl he met while working named Molly. Kirk has a low self-esteem and a bad dating history, which is why he believes Molly to be out of his league. After resolving some internal issues and finally cutting it off with his ex girlfriend, the film concludes with Kirk realizing he is good enough for Molly and they end up together.

The Switch outlines a story of a single woman who has a party to celebrate her getting pregnant from a sperm donor. Kassie, Wally and Roland are the primary characters. Kassie is running out of time to have a partner and therefore decides to find a sperm donor, Roland and have a baby on her own. Wally is Kassie's best friend and is single. After raising her son for years on her own, Kassie moves back to the city and reunites with Roland, who she begins dating. Soon after, the relationship between Kassie and Roland ends and Kassie and Wally begin a relationship. The film concludes with Kassie and Wally being happily married and celebrating their sons birthday.

Leap Year is the story of a woman named Anna who travels to Ireland to propose to her boyfriend who was in Ireland for work. Anna, her boyfriend Jeremy and Declan are the

primary characters in the story. Declan and Anna meet in Ireland when she hires him to escort her across the country to meet her boyfriend. Once Anna finally reaches Jeremy, he proposes to her and she accepts. Anna and her new finance return home and after an engagement party, Anna realizes that she does not want to marry Jeremy after all. Anna flies back to Ireland where she surprises Declan. The film concludes with an engagement between Anna and Declan.

How Do You Know outlines a story of a single female athlete named Lisa. Lisa goes on a blind date with a man named George who was having legal difficulties. Lisa is also in a relationship with Manny and moves in with him. The film concludes with Lisa leaving Manny and boarding a bus with George, which symbolizes the beginning of a relationship.

Characters were extremely homogeneous in the sample in terms of following prescribed gender roles, race, sexual preference, age, class and final marital status. In short, the majority of films conformed to socially approved gender norms by creating male characters as active and female characters as passive. Furthermore, the formation of love triangles was typically between two men and one woman. This affirms that romantic relationships are significant to feminine gender roles. Racial diversity was not evident in the films, except for in *The Back-up Plan* and *Valentine's Day*. These movies include actors who are African American and Latino. Other than these two films, the primary characters in the rest of the films were predominantly Caucasian. Sexual orientation was also portrayed through a narrow lens by including solely two same-sex relationships in *Life as We Know It* and *Valentine's Day*. *Valentine's Day* was an interesting film because it incorporated several relationships in the narrative. Therefore, it is expected that by incorporating several characters, some degree of diversity will be present. Age of primary characters was relatively

similar between films. Women were portrayed in each film as being of childbearing age and were secure in their employment. Therefore, the average age for women is estimated as mid twenties to early forties. *Valentine's Day* was again an exception and depicted characters in relationships ranging from all ages – from children to elders. Of course, the sample contained characters who belonged to most age groups, however relationships typically took place between individuals who were in the estimated age group of mid twenties to early forties. The women in most films were certainly depicted as belonging to the middle to upper class. Many were business owners or successful professionals. Finally, the conclusion of each film ended with main characters seriously committed to each other. Overall, the films represented rather ideal lives in the sense that “everything worked out”. The distinct portrayal of singles and coupled characters is discussed below. Through the discussion it is essential to keep in mind the identity of characters.

The Depictions of Being Single

As the following citations demonstrate, 'single status' characters were displayed as *waiting* for a significant other to find them, *dating*, or committed to remaining single.

The Search: General Comments

Characters were repeatedly portrayed as actively looking for a significant other. The desire for a serious partnership was reinforced in various ways. Looking for a relationship was an essential component to the narrative of these films and was therefore often approached as a topic of discussion by characters. The following quote was stated at the very beginning of *The Switch*, “What we crave most in life is connection, for some people it happens at first sight. It’s when you know you know. Its fate working it’s magic” (Loeb, 2010). This quote was among the initial dialogue in the film thereby situating relationships as

a significant theme. Furthermore *Valentine's Day* establishes that looking for a suitable partner is significant and something that parents think of from childhood. A mother of a young girl in *Valentine's Day* states, "When the time is right your father and I will find you such a nice Indian boy" (Fugate, 2010). This is an interesting example that also brings in introduces an age and ethnic diversity to the normal pattern. This example demonstrates the importance of relationships by commenting on the child's future. The comment also overtly assumes that the child is heterosexual and will want to participate in a relationship.

The dialogue between characters often provided insight as to whether or not characters were looking for a partner, or were socially expected to be looking for a partner. Therefore, looking for a partner was evident in the films through dialogue. Single characters were frequently influenced and persuaded into dating or being open to love by friends or family, or both. In *Life As We Know It*, *The Back-up Plan* and *When in Rome*, friends or parents approached the primary characters with potential suitors or ideas about being open to finding love. These characters were women, who appeared to belong to the middle or upper class, who were attractive and portrayed as being in their late-twenties to early thirties. In *When in Rome*, the main character's (Beth) father made his daughter promise that she would be open to love as he would like to plan another wedding. Beth did not have a potential partner and was not interested in finding one when speaking with her father. This quote demonstrates a strong expectation for marriage, an incredible pressure to marry and is entrenched with the belief that there is something wrong with remaining single.

A second form through which characters were depicted as looking for a relationship is by acknowledging the predetermined life course, which they were yet to achieve. Specifically, characters state that they planned to be married and have children by this point

in their life. In both *Life as we know it* and *The Back-up Plan*, the main characters openly state their desire and expectation of marriage and children, just not necessarily in the manner by which it happened. In *The Back-up Plan*, Zoe acknowledged the life course in the following phrase “...thought I would be married with kids by now” (Angelo, 2010). Evidently, the characters in these two movies were looking for a partner and had expected their life to unfold in a different order. This point will be elaborated under a following section. However, the notion that characters are displayed as actively expecting marriage, children and a nuclear family emphasizes that characters are looking for and expected to be in a relationship thereby reinforcing the ideology of marriage and family.

Waiting

Waiting for a partner is meaningful because it signifies characters that are not actively looking for a relationship but instead presented as waiting for a partner to find them. This category establishes that characters are waiting for a relationship to occur or are waiting for their relationship to progress to the next level. These expectations are desirable before a certain point in their life, for example age thirty when individuals start to feel like they should be married already (Cargan, 2007). Waiting can be linked to characters that were single, but also to characters who were in a committed relationship waiting to take it to the next level. Specifically, beneath the waiting sub category were characters who were displayed as waiting for a relationship, waiting for somebody who could provide a means to attain a house and children, and characters who were waiting for a deeper commitment such as a proposal of marriage. Three of the films made significant links to the family and the waiting component played a large role in where family life fits in with young adults. In total, six of the films contained relevant data demonstrating characters *waiting* to find love.

A central example of characters waiting for love was demonstrated in *When in Rome*. This film provides a powerful scene where the main character, who is a young, successful, white woman stands in a magic love fountain and expresses the following "we wait our whole life for that perfect man to come sweep us off of our feet, well guess what - it isn't coming" (Diamond & Weissman, 2010). This quote is entrenched with ideological values regarding marriage. It also suggests that a partner is necessary to have a complete life. Furthermore, by assuming that multiple people wait for the perfect man to come around, this quote reinforces the normalcy tied to intensive coupling, specifically for women. *Valentine's Day* also included content of characters waiting for a relationship. For example, characters were displayed as being upset because they had nothing planned on Valentine's Day. These examples both demonstrate how characters are depicted as waiting for relationships.

The following quote from *How Do You Know* offers insight that implies characters wait for a significant other, but are also cautious in finding the right partner: "take one product home and use it for the rest of your life" (Brooks, 2010). In this scene, a male character discusses taking products (women) home and eventually finding one that you would like to use for the rest of your life. This quote has several implications, but primarily underlines the notion that life long companionship is ideal.

A second theme drawn out from the films was the association between marital status and family. Both marital status and family were related to the age and gender of characters in the films. *The Back-up Plan* and *The Switch* painted rather contemporary depictions of the family from the introduction to the film. Both films outlined a story of women who chose to undergo artificial insemination despite being single because they wanted children and felt they were running out of time. The characters decided on artificial insemination because they

were single and were approaching an age where if they wanted children, they should have them sooner rather than later. The age of these two characters was depicted as somewhere between early to late thirties. These characters expressed their longing for children, yet because of their age they were unable to wait until they met a partner. These films are significant because they confirm that there is a link between age, marital status and family. These two movies are significant because in both cases the women had waited for a relationship, but decided to go through with artificial insemination because they had no other option if they wanted children.

The data also demonstrate that the waiting stage might prevail until individuals have achieved the status of being married. The main female characters in *Leap Year* and *Valentine's Day* both expressed their desire to move forward in their relationship, which would be accomplished with a proposal. Specifically in *Valentine's Day*, one of the characters articulates her desire to move forward by stating that she is tired of dating, and is jealous of her friend who is engaged. *Leap Year* follows a similar narrative in the fact that the character in the dating relationship intensely hopes for an engagement. These films were interesting because they reinforced traditional gender roles, especially in terms of proposing. The male characters maintained masculine characteristics by being active and proposing to their partner. *Leap Year* introduces an interesting dynamic by deciding that the woman would propose, because traditionally it is acceptable on February 29th.

Three dimensions of waiting for relationships or waiting for the following phase in relationships have been identified. They are significant as they emphasize the importance that is associated with relationships and a profound commitment to those relationships in the sample.

Dating: in pursuit of a committed relationship

The Switch establishes the importance and universality of dating in the following quote “Nobody is totally un-dateable” (Loeb, 2010). In each of the nine films, dating was a topic of dialogue between characters. One film (*Bounty Hunter*) did not include any scenes where characters were dating. However, dating was frequently approached through dialogue between characters. The remaining eight films each contained scenes of characters actively dating, by going out to dinner, going away for the weekend, participating in blind dates, etc. Each film in the sample did cover dating in conversation. Furthermore, men were actively working to convince the women to go out with them in all films except *How Do You Know*, *Life As We Know It* and *The Switch*. In *When in Rome*, *The Bounty Hunter* and *How Do You Know*, male characters tried to persuade women to date them and essentially begged the women to give them a chance. *When in Rome* was especially interesting because the main character, Beth, experienced several men confessing their love to her because they were under a love spell. Beth is also pursued by her brother-in-law, who refuses to quit trying until she agrees to date him. She’s *Out of My League* was an exception in comparison to the other films because it depicted a young woman, a successful ex-lawyer, and current event planner, who actively pursues her desired partner, thus defying traditional feminine gender roles in courtship. Regardless of gender roles, establishing a relationship was a dominant theme.

Interestingly, *Life as We Know It* and *The Switch* both starred young, successful, white, single mothers, one by choice (artificial insemination) and one by an unfortunate accident. The characters in these films seemed to skip over the traditional dating scene and jumped straight into a serious relationship with the individual that they ended up with. This point will be discussed in further detail below. However, Holly, the main character in *Life As We Know*

It, participates in dating a doctor who she believes can offer her the life she desires, until she realizes he is not the one.

It is clear that dating is a dominant component to the narrative of each film in the sample. Clearly, a great value is associated with relationships. Furthermore, all films except *She's Out of My League* supported traditional gender roles through the act of wooing.

'Celebrating' singlehood

Choosing to be single is the last subcategory of being single that was identified in the films. The subcategory contradicts the ideology of marriage and family, and is indicative of characters that chose to be single, or who celebrate their single status. It is essential to recognize that the women in these films were often quite successful in their work, were young, attractive and typically reaching their late twenties to mid thirties.

The Bounty Hunter, How Do You Know, The Switch, The Back-up Plan and *When in Rome* each portrayed female characters that were single and content with their status. The female characters were depicted as career driven and who did not overtly focus on finding a partner. This is significant because their friends and family were often 'looking' for them and organizing dates, even though the single women were content with their present situation.

Men were regularly exposed in a 'lesser than' manner. For example, *When in Rome* presented various suitors who were presented as odd, unintelligent, desperate and when compared to the lead female, were physically unattractive. *How Do You Know* followed this theme by presenting two primary male characters, one who was unintelligent yet successful, and one who was being wrongfully sued by the state and was recently broken up with. Needless to say, both of these male characters were portrayed as dealing with unfortunate life events.

The distinct portrayal of men and women is interesting in itself. *The Back-up Plan*, *How Do You Know*, and *The Switch* each portray female characters who overtly express that they do not need a partner. Specifically, two of these women are soon to be mothers, which adds an additional dynamic to them being single. However, these women celebrate their current singleness, and their future as single mothers. For example, the lead female in *The Back-up Plan* joins a support group called "Single Mothers and Proud", only to be rejected when she enters a relationship. The primary character in *The Switch* throws herself an "I'm Getting Pregnant Party", which was planned to find a suitable donor. Moreover, Lisa, the main character in *How Do You Know* confesses that she had never felt that a man was all she needed for personal contentment. Evidently, each of these characters is presented in a fashion that proves their satisfaction with being single.

The data demonstrate that although the female characters were initially content with being single, each *progressed* into a serious and committed relationship. As happily single characters transition into committed relationships, the inevitability of relationships is strongly reinforced. These examples, demonstrates that remaining single is not an option. Additionally, their desire to remain single is undermined and classified as an unfavorable social choice. In fact, each film concluded with couples being seriously committed to each other through cohabitation, a proposal for marriage or marriage itself. Moreover, all films, excluding *Valentine's Day*, *She's Out of My League* and *The Back-up Plan* involved two men pursuing the same female. Therefore, each of the five remaining films concluded with the female character selecting which of her suitors she preferred, while the other falls from the story (*The Bounty Hunter*, *How Do You Know*, *Leap Year*, *Life as We Know It*, *The Switch* and *When in Rome*). *She's Out of My League* is unique in comparison to the rest of

the sample because the love triangle was between two female characters and one male character. Therefore, in this case the male character was able to choose which female he desired instead of vice versa.

This category clearly demonstrates how characters were composed at the beginning of a film and therefore provides a foundation to compare how they are represented towards the end of the film.

Overall, the films convey the message that remaining single is not a desirable or valuable option. Characters are encouraged by friends to date, give love a chance and are advised against remaining single.

Coupled, Seriously Coupled and Married

The second main portion of data that was collected referred to characters that were depicted as coupled, whether it was a serious couple (committed) or married couple. Data were collected based on the following subcategories: resolving, ending, committing and rejecting. Rejecting, as a category is significant to this study because it represents characters who challenge the norm regarding marriage.

Resolving

Resolving was operationalized as a couple wherein both the woman and man were committed to one another and who decided to resolve conflicts instead of ending their relationship. The characters in the films proved to continuously try and resolve problems before ending their relationships. *Valentine's Day* summarized the significance that was linked to resolving relationships in one scene by acknowledging that when you love somebody, you love them for the good and the bad. This represents the value that is tied to trying to mend issues that arise in relationships. The process of resolving relationships was

evident in each of the nine films. Settling issues was experienced by characters was a joint process between the male and female characters.

A common theme through which characters resolved their difficulties was in the act of moving *back* in together, after separating. When a serious conflict arose between the characters, one of the couple would leave the familial home, but at some later point would return. This pattern was observable in *The Back-up Plan*, *Life As We Know It* and *How Do You Know*. In each of these films, one of the characters had moved out of their partner's house because they were unhappy in the relationship, yet evidently decided to return and resolve the problems.

Another method where characters were displayed resolving problems was through discussion and attempting to talk through whatever obstacle they were trying to overcome. *The Bounty Hunter* outlined the story of a divorced couple that reunited, who resolved differences by discussing what went wrong. Both members of the couple identified issues and took responsibility, which evidently solved their problems.

Resolving relationships played a significant role in each film in the sample, specifically because many of the plots revolved around three characters. As a result, one character (typically the female) was often going back between two prospects and therefore frequently ending one relationship and/or resolving a relationship.

Ending

Although seemingly contradictory to the central theme of privileging monogamous, committed relationships (marriage), ending relationships was a common theme found in the sample. A variety of tensions were detectable in the films, such as finances, parenting or simply believing that a partner was not the *right* one. These tensions were linked to

explaining why the relationship ended. Each of the nine films included at least one relationship between characters that ended, either permanently or temporarily. As a result, although romantic comedies ultimately present a successful romance between two characters (Mortimer, 2010), break ups are still a common occurrence. *Valentine's Day* and *Leap Year* both contained plots where the female leads left their fiancés because the women wanted to focus on themselves (*Valentine's Day*) or because their fiancé was not 'the one' (*Leap Year*).

How Do You Know, *The Switch*, *She's Out of My League* and *Life as We Know it* each portrayed relationships that ended because they were not the perfect match for each other. In each case, one of the partners left the relationship and had another partner essentially waiting for them (for a new relationship to begin). Each of these films, except *The Switch* had an elaborate love triangle, which involved relationships ending with more than one person. For example, the film *Life as We Know It* displays Holly's relationship with Messer ends because of the demands of his career. Shortly after, Holly begins a relationship with a doctor who can provide her with many of the things that she desires, such as having a stable partner. However, after an encounter with Messer, Holly realizes that the doctor is not the perfect match for her and ends that relationship. Similar scenarios were presented in the other films.

Significantly, five of the nine films (*The Bounty Hunter*, *How Do You Know*, *Leap Year*, *She's Out of My League* and *When in Rome*) depicted single characters or the character on the receiving end of a break up in a negative fashion. For example, the main character in *Leap Year* ended the relationship with her fiancé because he was consumed by his work and proposed to Anna so that they would be accepted into an elite apartment building (this apartment building wanted serious or married couples). Similarly, *The Bounty Hunter* portrayed Stewart as desperate and clumsy as he begged for Nicole to date him. Beth has

quite a few suitors that are portrayed as odd by following her around town, breaking into her apartment, etc. These examples are telling of how singles are portrayed as compared to characters that are in relationships. The reasons why relationships end are also significant. Typically, relationships would end because the partners were not the 'right one'. In this sense, by remaining with the wrong person, characters were depriving themselves of finding true love. As a result, ending relationships is often linked to the final goal of finding a suitable partner for life.

Committing

The data demonstrates that commitment is established in each film. Each film concluded with a successful relationship. Of course, commitment is an ambiguous term because it exists in varying degrees. Primarily, the sample portrayed serious commitment, which was depicted by characters who moved in together and through engagements/marriage. Engagements and marriage are lumped together in the summary of data because some films concluded with a proposal and others with a marriage. On the other hand, a less serious commitment was found in a couple of movies, where the characters simply decided to be together through a verbal agreement.

Five of the nine films included characters moving in together. *The Back-up Plan*, *The Bounty Hunter*, *How Do You Know*, *Life As We Know It*, and *The Switch* each portrayed couples who at one point chose to live together thereby demonstrating their commitment to the relationship. Two of the four films, *Life As We Know It* and *The Back-up Plan* are interesting examples because part of the decision to move in together is linked to the care of the children. The characters in *Life As We Know It* were more or less forced to move in together when they received custody of their deceased friends' child. As a result, Holly and

Messer were living separate lives, but together in the same household. However, after resolving some issues, they moved back in together because they loved each other and wanted to raise the child together. Similarly, *The Back-up Plan* involved a couple who eventually decided to live together, raise the children together and marry.

The second way that commitment was displayed on the film was through a proposal for marriage, or the marriage itself. Engagements or marriage occurred in six of the nine films, *The Back-up Plan*, *How Do You Know*, *Leap Year*, *The Switch*, *Valentine's Day* and *When in Rome*. An engagement occurred in *How Do You Know* between secondary characters, with the female being pregnant and nonetheless demonstrating a commitment thereby resulting in a nuclear family. The remaining four films embraced proposals for marriage as something sacred and incredibly special. In *The Back-up Plan* and *How Do You Know* the proposals occurred with an audience, often containing individuals who did not appear to be incredibly close to the couple. Additionally, friends and family appear to be quite supportive of the plan to marriage by congratulating the couple.

As stated, each film in the sample concluded with a couple happily together through marriage, cohabitation, an engagement or just deciding to be together. Five of the films finished shortly after demonstrating that the couple was joyfully together, without overt discussion of marriage. *The Bounty Hunter*, *How Do You Know*, *Life As We Know It* and *She's Out of My League* each ended with the central couples being together and communicating their love for each other. In this sense, a profound commitment was implied once the couple established that they belonged together.

Rejecting

This subcategory was initially introduced to reflect characters who visibly rejected the

notion of serious coupling or marriage. The films and their plots strongly suggested that when a character rejected marriage it was not due to a misbelief or a concern with the institution of marriage, but was caused by a fear of getting hurt (*When in Rome*) or a fear of marrying the wrong person (*Valentine's Day*, *Leap Year*). Therefore, marriage as an institution was not rejected in the films. However, a rejection of the anticipated order of events was clearly present in the sample.

Three of the movies focused on family life. *The Back-up Plan*, *Life As We Know it* and *The Switch* each incorporated family life (children) into story. *The Back-up Plan* and *The Switch* highlighted female characters who wanted to have children. As a result of being unattached, the female characters in both of these films decided to undergo artificial insemination. Both of the women recognized that becoming a single mom defied their original plan; however their ideal plan did not materialize and they were prepared to do what was necessary in order to have children. Zoe, the lead female in *The Back-up Plan* illustrates this by stating that she "thought she would be married with kids by now" (Angelo, 2010). This quote implies that Zoe believed she had reached an age where she had expected to have been married and had children, suggesting that she is lacking something in accordance with her age. Holly in *Life As We Know It* maintains a similar position as Zoe by stating that she always imagined being married with children; however she envisioned it happening in a different manner.

In *The Back-up Plan* and *The Switch* the order of events contradicted traditional thinking by the woman getting pregnant and planning to raise the child as a single parent. Moreover, the couples decided to live together and then raise the child together and get married. Similarly, *Life As We Know It* depicts a couple who began raising a child together,

then fell in love, followed by a commitment to live together. It is clear that these three films reject the predetermined expectancy of how life events fall into place. The lead character in *The Back-up Plan* was clear in identifying that they "did everything backwards" (Angelo, 2010).

Summary: Presentation of Marital Status in Sample

In these films, a specific narrative about marriage as an achievement and sign of personal success predominates. Friends and family are often implicated in this quest. In addition, single characters are often encouraged by family and friends to be open to love. Single characters are depicted as waiting for a partner or waiting for a deeper commitment. Dating occurred in each film and played a significant role in the overall narrative. At the beginning of most of the movies, most of the female characters were single and each female character who was originally single, was depicted as quite content with her single role status; however as the story unraveled each of these women ended up in a committed relationship (*She's Out of My League* is an exception to this simply because the sex of characters was reversed).

Resolving relationships was a recurring theme found in the sample. Couples tried to resolve conflicts by moving back in together, discussing their problems and attempting to make the relationship last. Relationships ended when they were not with the *right* person. Commitment was a continuous theme found in the samples. Couples committed verbally, by moving in together, through engagements or through marriage. Rejecting marriage or serious coupling was not evident in the films. However, rejecting the normative life trajectory was observable in three films, specifically in films that regarded family life and children. The implications of these findings will be discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: Discussion

First and foremost, romantic comedies are written around love and relationships (Mortimer, 2010). Relationships, engagements, the institution of marriage and ultimately discovering the *right* person is central to the narrative of romantic comedies thereby associating significant emphasis towards relationships and love. The data demonstrates that committed relationships are something that are desirable, are expected by individuals and inevitably will happen; it is simply a matter of time. This chapter explores how serious partnering is valued in contemporary romantic comedies by analyzing the data. Furthermore, the sample highlights the importance of discovering the right individual; focuses on heterosexual couples; couples moving forward in their relationship through some form of serious commitment, etc. The consistent focus on finding a partner suggests that being single is something to transition out of and is an overt form of singlism. The data demonstrates that dynamics of relationships are uniquely experienced by each sex. In addition, family form and sexuality will be briefly explored in relation to their depiction in the films.

Overall, traditional family values are advertised by the continuous portrayal of serious relationships. Such illustrations are characteristic of the traditional nuclear family that became prominent in the 1950's (Kimmel & Holler, 2011). The naturalization and normalcy that became linked to nuclear families in the 1950s maintains significant value in present Canadian society, which is directly connected to the ideology of marriage and family (Kimmel & Holler, 2011). Each of these findings will be discussed, followed by a discussion of the implications for the audience.

As a major institution the mass media reflects ideologies, which are characteristic of “majority interests and mainstream priorities” (Fleras, 2011: 52). As a result, the 1950s symbolize a time when the nuclear family gained prominence in Canadian society. The

ideology of marriage and family prevailed during this time and became rooted within institutions. Because this ideology gained such acceptance and value it became embedded in the mass media and this is yet to fade, despite the changing forms of the family and marriage.

Relationships: Desirable, Expected and Inevitable

Mortimer (2010) indicates that, as a genre, romantic comedies usually outline the progression of a relationship between characters. As anticipated, the data was in sync with Mortimer's statement. Since the initial phases of relationships are demonstrated, they are simultaneously presented as something that characters are actively pursuing. In this way characters desire relationships and expect themselves and others to find a romantic partner. The data establishes that falling in love and entering a relationship are inevitable occurrences.

The appeal of relationships was apparent as characters were portrayed as looking for a partner for themselves or for a loved one. Berg (2007) states that in order for something to be considered a pattern in content analysis it must occur three times. As indicated in the previous chapter, three films (*When in Rome*, *Life as we Know It* and *The Back-up Plan*) contain characters who are either looking to find themselves a partner or has a friend or family member seeking out a partner for them. These instances infer that characters are expected by their loved ones to have a romantic partner or at least be looking. It leads to question, why are these individuals single? Why have they not found a partner yet? But most importantly, why do they need a partner? The importance of seeking out a significant other was also established by including dating as a topic that was approached in one form or another.

Characters were set up on blind dates, pursuing potential partners on their own; dating was frequently approached as a topic of conversation, etc. With a heavy emphasis on dating

practices, each film demonstrated that finding a partner, not to mention the right partner, is intensely desirable. Even the characters that were presented as independent and happily single ended up dating and in seriously committed relationships. Therefore, within the sample it is clearly identifiable that relationships are portrayed as desirable with characters a) looking for a partner and b) participating in regular dating.

In six of the nine films (*The Back-up Plan*, *How do you Know*, *Leap Year*, *The Switch*, *Valentine's Day* and *When in Rome*) characters were illustrated in one way or another as waiting for a partner or waiting for a relationship to progress further through a deeper commitment. For example, one character expresses that individuals wait for love their whole lives. Importantly, the character acknowledges people as a collectivity, implying that the search for love is a widespread value, encompassing the beliefs of a great number of people. Moreover, the characters that are in seriously committed partnerships were portrayed as waiting for a deeper commitment. This was mainly common of female characters. Two films from the sample (*Leap Year* and *Valentine's Day*) contained female characters that appeared to be in serious relationships; both female characters were eager for the relationship to move forward and were waiting for their male partner to propose. These examples suggest traditional gender roles and uphold the value tied to legal and formal marriage. The search for a potential partner is observable in the sample with characters looking for a relationship, dating, waiting or anticipating a relationship moving into a deeper commitment. These actions and values each reinforce the status of romantic relationships and emphasize the notion underlying the inescapable path people find themselves following towards establishing a serious relationship.

The sample reveals that romantic heterosexual relationships occupy a significant phase in life and serious relationships eventually happen regardless of an individual's personal desire. Each of the nine films concluded with a heterosexual couple committing to each other through an engagement to marry, marriage or simply discussing their love for one another. Moreover, characters were not simply ending up in a relationship, but a serious union that appeared to be quite strong with a long-term commitment, implying marriage. Levels of seriousness were expressed with characters involvement in marriage, engagements, moving in together and confessing love to each other. In some of the films where the narrative outlined a love triangle, an individual did end up alone. However, as stated in the previous chapter, the characters that typically were single possessed undesirable character traits. Mortimer (2010) outlines that characters in romantic comedies often experience many obstacles before they are able to finally be together. Because romantic comedies generally follow a particular narrative, the audience can anticipate couples ending up together. However, this sample fails to include space for diverse representations of the family, couples, etc. Although romantic comedies follow a very specific storyline, it does not alter the fact that the content broadcasted from the mass media is often internalized by the audience (Fleras, 2011). The mass media serves a dominating role in socializing greater society and therefore the implications of such strict and traditional illustrations of couples must be considered. Evidently, it is clear how this sample is saturated with ideological values regarding relationships and marriage.

Significance

The conclusions drawn from the sample establish that serious coupling and relationships in general are highly valued in contemporary romantic comedies, regardless of

changing demographics. The data illustrates that relationships are displayed as incredibly desirable, an anticipated part of life and will undeniably ensue at some point, specifically for women. Situating relationships as centrally prevalent has incredible influence over the audience. By presenting characters as continuously looking for a partner, seeking a significant other becomes normalized. Being single becomes something individuals try to avoid. It would be interesting to consider what degree of societal pressure maintains in influencing individuals to participate in relationships and marriage. Singlism is observable because friends and family of characters were regularly trying to set single characters up with a potential mate, which implies their need for a partner. Likewise, characters, typically female are depicted as waiting for a relationship, believing a partner will find them or expecting to take their relationship to the next level through an engagement, moving in together, etc. Each of the primary characters in the film ended up in serious and committed relationships, which consequently lead to their happiness.

These subtle examples have profound implications. Additionally, as similar representations are consistently found throughout films, there is firm evidence to assume that comparable themes and values may be present in other films, especially romantic comedies. Endless illustrations of singles that are looking and waiting for relationships suggest that being single is undesirable. These films suggest that individuals should strive to find a partner until they do. This gives reason as to why DePaulo & Morris (2005) state that marriage is an achievement. Presenting singles as endlessly searching for a partner implies that they are lacking something fundamental in their life. It infers that sharing a romantic relationship is above being single. With characters that are determined to find a partner, seeking a committed relationship is normalized. Pursuing a romantic partner becomes a

normal part of emerging adulthood and pressure starts to increase as characters age. Characters in each film commit to relationships through marriage, engagements, etc., the message is that the end goal of marriage is ideal, valued and something to hope and strive for.

These observations undeniably mirror the values of the ideology of marriage and family. They exude the belief that something fundamental is wrong with remaining single and promote serious relationships as ideal. Such representations not only assume relationships as superior, but as normal. DePaulo (2006) writes that singlism is a distinct form of discrimination because it involves pity as opposed of hate. Pity implies that singles are deprived of something incredibly important. Singlist values are unmistakably represented in romantic comedies through characters attempting to find partners for their single loved ones. Even the characters that initially expressed their happiness as single women, unavoidably ended up in serious relationships. For the primary characters, particularly the females, being single was not a viable option. It is critical is consider what this entails for the audience and what is encompasses in countries where same sex marriage is accepted and valued, where common-law marriage is legalized and becoming increasingly common. The publicized illustrations by contemporary romantic comedies include images of characters that are not in sync with Canadian society. For example, the latest census report states that the number of same sex couples increased forty two percent since 2006, common law relationships rose to over thirteen percent, which is more than four times the increase of married couples (Statistics Canada, 2012d). The messages pertaining to love and relationships are overwhelmingly traditional by depicting serious coupling between man and woman as the only option. This is extremely problematic because of the media's role in socialization; it does not provide a sound illustration of the abundant life paths that are

possible. These films are entrenched with ideological messages regarding marriage and relationships, profound and embedded discriminatory messages towards singles and an overall misleading depiction of relationships.

Gender, Age and Sexuality

Gender roles were performed similarly throughout the majority of films, with *She's Out of My League* being an exception. Excluding *The Back-up Plan*, *She's Out of My League* and *Valentine's Day*, the remaining six films contained two male love interests essentially fighting over the primary female character. The love triangle that is commonly found in the sample illustrates how men and women perform gender. First, two men continuously fighting over one woman indicates that they are active, aggressive and pursue their desires.

Comparably, the female characters maintain increasingly passive roles in the dating world and are not likely to actively pursue a partner. In this sense, when it came to dating female characters were passive in all of the films, except *The Back-up Plan*, *She's Out of My League* and *Valentine's Day*. *She's Out of My League* included two female characters that defied traditional gender roles by enthusiastically pursuing their romantic interest. In this way, although the two main female characters challenged traditional gender roles, they also conformed to gender norms by seeking a romantic partner.

Another interesting characteristic of the female characters was that women were often depicted as very successful and accomplished in their work. Many of the women were business owners (*The Back-up Plan*, *Life as We Know It*, *She's Out of My League*) or being very successful in their professions as journalists, lawyers, etc. On the same note, these characters were also presented as awfully dedicated to their job. The primary female characters in each movie, were presented as having it all, except for a relationship.

The association between gender, age and marital status requires analysis.

Intersectionality is a useful tool in considering how these three dimensions of identity influence each other. The sample proved that there is an increased amount of pressure on women to marry, a greater expectation for women to have a partner and the expectation of attaining a serious relationship is linked to age. Containing images of men continuously chasing after female characters, these characters eventually giving into their pursuer and always ending up in committed relationships proves the importance for women to be in a relationship as compared to men. Age was expressed as an issue by female characters who desired a family. Additionally, age was acknowledged as a topic of concern by other characters. *The Back-up Plan*, *Life as We Know It* and *The Switch* each identify age as a potential obstacle for women to achieve their preferred life. *The Back-up Plan* and *The Switch* are stories of women who choose alternative routes because they have reached a certain age, which would be ideologically considered past their prime. In *Life as We Know It*, the main female character is accused of being complicated because she is still single at her age, which appears to be only her late twenties to early thirties. The implications of these representations are clear. Women are likely to feel increased pressure to find a partner as they age. Interestingly, *The Switch* did include a scene of a woman commenting on the primary male character's age as she was shocked to hear he was single. Therefore, the films clearly demonstrate a profound expectation for women to find a partner, but also for men.

Recognizing the use of sexuality in the sample is significant to this study and the ideology of marriage and family. Simply put, the sample was remarkably heteronormative. Out of the nine films, solely two homosexual couples were portrayed in *Life as We Know It* and *Valentine's Day*. Moreover, the same-sex couple did not maintain a major role in the

film, as they were secondary characters. Therefore, same-sex couples were underrepresented in the sample, not to mention a complete lack of representation regarding bi-sexuality, pan sexuality, etc.

Significance

Critically examining how gender, age and sexuality are used in the sample are essential because their use and unambiguous depiction is viewed and likely internalized by millions of people. This is critical considering the modest ratings of these films (excluding *She's Out of My League*) facilitates easy access for a young audience who could be more prone to influential material than adults who have already transitioned through adulthood.

Nevertheless, it is safe to assume, based on the studies of the power of the media (Fleras, 2010) and case studies (Signorielli, 1991) that these films are incredibly influential despite age.

The plots of romantic comedies in general have major connotations regarding marital status and gender roles. As seven of the films contained a love triangle, one character was destined to end up alone. *She's Out of My League* contained two men chasing after one woman and is therefore an exception to the typical gender roles. Yet, nonetheless upholds the ideology of marriage through the pursuit of love. The remaining six films (*The Bounty-Hunter*, *How Do You Know*, *Leap Year*, *Life as We Know It*, *The Back-up Plan* and *When in Rome*) each contain two men who are actively pursuing the same woman. Thus, from the initial phases of the movie, one can predict that the female character will find love with one of the two suitors. Examining this storyline is particularly interesting because a number of these characters were content being single. Many scholars have acknowledged that delaying marriage in present society is common (Cargan, 2007; Clark, 2007; Riedmann et al., 2003).

Yet, every film, excluding *She's Out of My League* concluded with the female character choosing who she desires and living happily ever after with her partner. *She's Out of My League* concluded with the male lead choosing which woman he wanted to pursue a relationship with. Therefore each film concluded with a serious coupling. For women, this implies that finding a partner is inevitable and quite important. It also affirms that it is more acceptable for men to remain single until a later age, which is in accordance with the literature (Doyle & Paludi, 1995). The dating pattern of man seeking woman is meaningful because it follows active gender roles for men and passive feminine roles for women because men are actively seeking out a partner, while the women simply have to reject or accept their suitor.

An additional point that was revealed in the data was the association between age and marital status. As Arnett (2004) and Clark (2007) recognize, there are presupposed life transitions that are expected to take place before people reach a certain age. Marriage or serious coupling is one of these transitions. By regularly discussing the age of characters in relation to their lack of partner, it reinforces the ideological belief that being single is not an option, especially as individuals get older. Introducing age into the argument implies that by the time adults reach a certain point in their life, they are supposed to have a partner with whom to share their life. These representations are exactly in sync with the marriage and motherhood mandate as described by Jessie Bernard (Paludi & Doyle, 1995). They reinforce ideological notions of marriage and relationships in general, explicitly outlining the institutional timing for marriage.

The lack of diversity in terms of presenting sexuality is also extremely problematic. Mainly, by failing to acknowledge that sexualities exist on a continuum, with heterosexuality

signifying merely one option, the sample fails to accurately represent a wholesome image of sexuality. By incorporating and referencing heterosexual couples exclusively – with *Life as We Know It* and *Valentine's Day* exceptions – the sample reinforces heteronormativity thereby strengthening traditional values. Because the media maintains such influence over the public in socializing and educating society, promoting heterosexuality as the norm supports that anything but heterosexuality is abnormal.

The data clearly demonstrates that contemporary romantic comedies express strict messages regarding the association between relationships and gender, age and sex. This is problematic as it reinforces a traditional and outdated standard that no longer holds such prominent value in Canadian society, as we have moved to be more diverse in terms of marital status, sexuality, family form, etc.

Family Form

Three of the films contained a storyline that focused on family life. Two of the films: *The Back-up Plan* and *The Switch* focused on women who choose to attempt motherhood through a sperm donor. In both cases, the female characters were at an age and stage in their life where they desired children. Zoe acknowledges in *The Back-up Plan* that she expected herself to already be married with children by her age. Moreover, Kassie was advised in *The Switch* to hold off on the artificial insemination so that it would not create any obstacles if she met a potential partner. Both women openly expressed their desire to have a child and their ease at becoming a single mother. However, as the story unravels both of these women inevitably fall in love and establish a nuclear family.

The plot differs in *Life as We Know It*, with two friends receiving custody of their friends' child after they pass away. After conflict arises between the two friends trying to

raise the child together, Holly establishes that she will be a single mom. However, following the theme of love and nuclear families, the two characters resolve their problems and raise the child together. Each of the films reinforces traditional notions of the family.

Significance

These three films are particularly influential because they introduce the notion of family structure and children. Each of the three films includes successful women who end up in serious and committed relationships. Moreover, single parenthood was approached as a personal and desirable option for two women, which does reinforce an increasingly diverse family form of single parents. However, by leading the characters to inevitably end up in committed relationships and achieving a nuclear family, the films strengthen the ideological values tied to the nuclear family. The structure of the Canadian family is quite diverse today (Riedmann et al, 2003) and is therefore not accurately represented in the sample. Again, since the media plays such a dominant role in socializing it's audience it is crucial that accurate portrayals of the family are presented, or at the very least diverse portrayals to demonstrate that the family unit does not always include a nuclear family, especially with today's technology. With traditional and ideological images of couples and family depicted in the media, these illustrations become standards and the social norm. In this sense, these films were certainly entrenched with notions of intensive coupling. DePaulo and Morris (2005) recognize that intensive coupling is a prominent indication of the ideology of marriage and family.

Diversity of Representation

Thus far, content from the sample has been identified and discussed. Examining the material from the romantic comedies is noticeably homogeneous concerning how marital

status and relationships are portrayed. It is crucial to consider what marital status was included in the films and which was excluded. Could the films have incorporated material that referred to alternative life paths? The sample failed to portray singlehood as a marital status in itself. As a result, the sample conveys a clear path regarding adults, which excludes remaining single as a possible status.

Clark (2007) acknowledges that emerging adults go through various phases as they transition into adulthood. Additionally, Clark (2007) recognizes young emerging adults as delaying some of these phases. The phases of entering adulthood include, where to live, who to live with, whether or not to pursue a higher education, decided to marry or not, etc. (Clark, 2007). In terms of marital status, there is one option that is expected by individuals (DePaulo & Morris, 2005), particularly in the predetermined path to enter adulthood, which is marriage. The sample delivered restrictive, yet common, paths for individuals to follow of serious couples. It leads to question: why is remaining singles not depicted as a final option for individuals? Yes, marriage is a celebrated and valued institution in society and for that reason will be presented in films. But what does the lack of remaining single mean for individuals who choose to remain single?

Similarly, what are the implications of portraying very few same-sex couples? Is there a reason the media isolates representations of same sex couples? Does the media believe same sex couples to be abnormal or is it simply the media picking and choosing which representations should and should not be communicated to the public? Likewise, there is little diversity in the age of characters. Women are presented as young and enthusiastic, presumably in childbearing ages with the male lead actor represented as being of similar age. Failure by the media to accurately represent the diversity of society has explicit

consequences for society as a whole simply because the media serves as a primary mode of socialization. In many ways, the media is a teacher.

Today the media has been credited for incorporating modern representations into its content (Fleras, 2011; Reynolds, 2008). However, even the modern representations are entrenched with conventional messages regarding marital status (Reynolds, 2008).

Therefore, when asking what the lack of singleness in the media entails, the answer is rather straightforward. Certainly failing to recognize singlehood as a plausible life decision means that the ideology of marriage and family continues to thrive. It leads to question whether or not remaining single is abnormal, particularly for women. Participating in wifedom and motherhood are core gender roles for women and are important for women to fill their expected social role (Doyle & Paludi, 1995).

By failing to present and depict remaining single as a choice, the mass media is casting singlehood as undesirable. The fact that looking for a partner was such a common theme in the sample implies that individuals who are single are lacking something, which they should be searching for – a romantic partner. The regular life course encompasses the belief that individuals need a romantic partner. Through this, the values within the ideology of marriage and family are strengthened. In this way, the characters are not overtly discriminated against in terms of being treated unfairly or being subject to violence. However, negative perceptions of singles are a subtle form of discrimination. Singles are presented as lacking something major, which leads the audience to feel pity for them.

The issue of concern is the complete lack of diversity in the media. Singles are largely underrepresented. A study conducted regarding the lack of diversity concerning homosexuality in network television argues that homosexual viewers are isolated through the

media (Kielwasser & Wolf, 1992). Kielwasser and Wolf (1992) acknowledge the isolation through the following quote "...adolescent characters are always heterosexual and the adolescent audience is addressed as if it were composed exclusively of heterosexual viewers" (p: 350). Underrepresentation or a complete lack of representation marginalizes individuals who stray from the norm. Therefore, remaining single and completing an alternative life course is common in Canada, but does not appear to be represented to the media.

The manner through which marriage is depicted is as superior, valued and an event that should inevitably occur in ones life. Consequently, individuals who choose to forego marriage/serious coupling are viewed as people who are lacking something fundamental in their life. Mortimer (2010) acknowledges that romantic comedies conclude with a happy ending. Additionally, the story involves a pursuit of love and almost always concludes with a happy couple. Therefore, a happy ending refers to the characters ending up happily coupled. What about characters who are happily single?

Intersectionality

Pressure to marry fluctuates depending on several characteristics, most notably sex and age. The ideal temporal time of marriage was depicted throughout the sample by characters participating in marriage and engagements. The sample affirmed that an ideal time for marriage does exist and that pressure increases with age. Characters who were slightly older (mid thirties to early forties) acknowledge that they had planned to already be married. Becoming a wife is central to feminine gender roles, which thereby places a significant amount of pressure on women to marry (Doyle & Paludi, 1995). For women, marriage used to symbolize an entry into adulthood (Doyle & Paludi, 1995). Participating in marriage by becoming a wife and homemaker provided women with the opportunity to fulfill their

predetermined gender roles and conform to gender norms (Doyle & Paludi, 1995). However, growing numbers of women have found alternative ways to satisfy their social role. In current society, it is socially acceptable to delay marriage by marrying around the age of thirty (Cargan, 2007). Nevertheless, as people age it becomes less and less acceptable to be single. Since feminine gender roles are tightly bound to marriage, remaining single for women is judged more harshly than for men, especially as they age.

Becoming a husband is not associated with masculine gender roles as it is for women (Doyle & Paludi, 1995). Although becoming a father and husband is a significant part in a man's life, it does not mark their identity as it does for women. Masculine gender roles are more concerned with being successful, self-reliant, anti-feminine, etc., (Doyle & Paludi, 1995). Therefore, men are not perceived in the same way that women are regarding relationships. Simply by viewing the films, it is clear that marriage is supposed to take place between two heterosexual people who are young adults. Evidently gender and age play a significant role in determining the proper time of marriage. Although this project was unable to cover several dimensions of identity, it is essential to keep in mind that characters were presented as a homogenous group in terms of socio-economics, race, sexual preference as well as age and conformity to gender roles.

The media has powerful control over what kind of material is internalized by audiences. Fleras (2011) discusses the media as entrenched with ideologies regarding race, gender class, age and sexuality. As the sample demonstrated, quite narrow perspectives are depicted in relation to marital status as well. Are race, gender, class, age and sexuality also represented with such exclusiveness? After examining the data, the answer would be yes. This study revealed that romantic comedies portray gender, age and sexuality as narrow and isolating

for anybody who diverts from fitting into their prescribed gender role, from being youthful or who is not heterosexual. As briefly discussed, the majority of women presented in the sample were portrayed as professionally successful. Although this paper does not address the classist depictions, they were evident in the sample. From these conclusions, one can determine the mass media as presenting rather narrow and overall ideological representations of life.

Conclusion

As a group, individuals who are labeled as ‘single’ are negatively perceived by themselves and mainstream society. Singlism is a form of discrimination, stigmatization and prejudice, which is regularly encountered by singles (DePaulo & Morris, 2005). Singlism is deeply embedded into social norms and values. As a result, singlism succeeds often without even being recognized (DePaulo & Morris, 2005). The social sciences have come a long way in identifying various dimensions of identities that people are discriminated upon. For example, today in Canada it is unlawful to treat individuals differently based on their sex or gender. However, civil status has not been recognized -apart from by a few scholars – as a dimension of identity through which individuals experience negative treatment. Therefore, the topic that required examination is observing how marital status is portrayed in the media. Specifically, exploring if civil status is represented with ideological values in contemporary films. Recognizing how marital status is depicted in romantic comedies is significant for several reasons. First, Canadian demographics have evolved with people choosing to delay or forego marriage. Secondly, the media is a dominant form of socialization, which consequently entails that the audience internalizes many of the ideas and values communicated through the media. Thirdly, the messages conveyed through the mass media are typically overwhelmingly ideological (Fleras, 2011). Therefore, identifying how marital status is presented is crucial. It is essential to consider how the portrayals are associated with current demographics and discrimination.

After performing a content analysis on nine romantic comedies, which were released in 2010, this research demonstrates that despite changing demographics, recent films continually express ideological messages regarding marriage and to some degree the family. The findings demonstrate that in accordance with DePaulo and Morris (2005), the ideology

is socially ingrained through institutions. The media is not an exception to this and undeniably contains quite traditional values regarding marital status. Furthermore, the films demonstrate that relationships are desired, expected and inevitable. Importantly, a predetermined life path that includes serious coupling is reinforced in the sample because relationships are conveyed as predestined to occur. Evidently, these representations are symbolic of a notion that individuals should be in relationships. As a result, remaining single is not represented as a possible decision.

The sample unavoidably covered marital status as a major theme simply by the genre. The data demonstrates that contemporary films are entrenched with ideological values and simultaneously negative beliefs towards singles. Eagleton (1991) states that ideologies are able to maintain their superior status and value in society by denigrating options that defy the ideology. In each film, being single did not appear to be an option for the main characters, specifically women, as each film concluded with a serious and committed couple. Ideologies are firm in their values. The problem is that ideologies are rooted in major institutions (Dijk, 1998). While institutions maintain a prominent role in socializing individuals, ideologies are evidently internalized. The findings affirmed traditional values regarding marriage, in the sense that marriage is significant, should happen, and individuals will be content when it does occur.

Remaining single is not illustrated as a desirable choice or a choice at all for characters. The lack of representation isolates and marginalizes singles in society. These messages are communicated to a large and influential audience. Although, singles are a growing social category, they remain underrepresented in the mass media. Furthermore, a lack of

representation contributes to misleading perceptions of singles. The films were also incredibly traditional in terms of demonstrating sexuality, gender roles and age.

Using intersectionality as a tool to understand how various dimensions of identity shape a personal experience was significant because it encompasses the notion that experiences vary based on different dimensions of identity. For example, age played an important role in determining whether or not people are expected to be in a serious relationship or not. In the sample women received more pressure from friends and family to enter a relationship than men did. Although the ideology of marriage and family maintains profound expectations for men and women, the beliefs clearly fluctuate based on dimensions of identity such as age or sex. Out of the nine films, same sex couples were explicitly portrayed in two films, *Life as We Know it* and *Valentine's Day*. Furthermore, the primary characters in each film consisted of heterosexual men and women, which reinforce heterosexuality as a social norm. Gender roles were also increasingly conventional in the sample. By continuously including a love triangle between one woman and two men (except in *She's Out of My League*), the sample affirms that it is more important for women to find a partner. Men were portrayed as active and aggressive by regularly pursuing women. Female characters on the other hand were conveyed as more passive as they often gave into the men.

From the sample, it is observable that relationships are desirable, expected by individuals and relationships will inevitably happen. This is incredibly significant because these beliefs are symbolic of the ideology of marriage and family. Ideal representations of relationships and the family are still reinforced in contemporary film. By failing to conclude stories with characters that are happily single, the films are entrenched with subtle messages of singlism. A complete lack of diversity in terms of marital status was observable. This is

problematic because it casts singlehood as undesirable and something that individuals should choose against. Contemporary films do not cover an accurate illustration of marital status. Scriptwriters and movie producers might argue that they are simply writing a story, which is not a direct reflection of society. However, as consumers of the mass media, it is crucial to consider what messages are being presented and what they imply.

This study simply represents the initial stages of exploring the association between the ideology of marriage and family and romantic comedies. Future research would benefit by completing a cultivation analysis, similar to the study conducted by Signorielli in 1991, where the long-term effects can be established, if there are any. This study has laid the groundwork by identifying that the media has ideological messages embedded within. Researchers are able to assume to some degree the influence of this by relating it to socialization and internalization of the media. A cultivation study would push this study further and provide greater insight.

In conclusion, it is evident that the ideology of marriage and family is profoundly ingrained in the media and serves to reinforce ideals and denote many 'alternative' life paths that are common in Canadian society. Despite, the evolution of the Canadian family and of marital values - these realities have not been able to overcome the power of ideology.

Appendix A

Description of films

The Back-up Plan - A romantic comedy centered on a woman who conceives twins through artificial insemination, only to meet the man of her dreams on the very same day. (Internet Movie Database, accessed September 9th 2012).

The Bounty Hunter - A bounty hunter learns that his next target is his ex-wife, a reporter working on a murder cover-up. Soon after their reunion, the always-at-odds duo find themselves on a run-for-their-lives adventure. (Internet Movie Database, accessed September 9th 2012).

How Do You Know? - After being cut from the USA softball team and feeling a bit past her prime, Lisa finds herself evaluating her life and in the middle of a love triangle, as a corporate guy in crisis competes with her current, baseball-playing beau. (Internet Movie Database, accessed September 9th 2012).

Leap Year - Anna Brady plans to travel to Dublin, Ireland to propose to her boyfriend Jeremy on February 29, leap day, because, according to Irish tradition, a man who receives a marriage proposal on a leap day must accept it. (Internet Movie Database, accessed September 9th 2012).

Life as We Know It - Holly Berenson (Katherine Heigl) is an up-and-coming caterer and Eric Messer (Josh Duhamel) is a promising network sports director. After a disastrous first date, the only thing they have in common is their dislike for each other and their love for their goddaughter, Sophie. But when they suddenly become all Sophie has in the world, Holly and Messer are forced to put their differences aside. Juggling career ambitions and competing social calendars, they'll have to find some common ground while living under one roof. (Movieweb, accessed September 9th 2012)

She's Out of My League - An average Joe meets the perfect woman, but his lack of confidence and the influence of his friends and family begin to pick away at the relationship. (Internet Movie Database, accessed September 9th 2012).

The Switch - Seven years after the fact, a man comes to the realization that he was the sperm donor for his best friend's boy. (Internet Movie Database, accessed September 9th 2012).

Valentine's Day - Intertwining couples and singles in Los Angeles break-up and make-up based on the pressures and expectations of Valentine's Day. (Internet Movie Database, accessed September 9th 2012).

When in Rome - Beth is a young, ambitious New Yorker who is completely unlucky in love. However, on a whirlwind trip to Rome, she impulsively steals some coins from a reputed

fountain of love, and is then aggressively pursued by a band of suitors. (Internet Movie Database, accessed September 9th 2012).

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