ABSTRACT. Many stereotypes influence attitudes toward never-married women. There is very little existing data on their actual life experiences and how they have handled singlehood over a lifetime. In addition, it is not known if they are subject to some of the common stereotypes of old age. This paper examines and analyses these issues by reporting on in-depth interviews with 15 never-married women who were 80 years of age and over. Although a great diversity was found, most of these women had led satisfying lives and were satisfied with relationships with family members and friends. In addition, they were able to handle the diminishments of age positively and realistically.

INTRODUCTION

Until recently, never-married persons have been included with widowed, separated and divorced persons in research studies. It's only in the past few years they have become the focus of research as an independent group, and as that group emerges, gender and age have not been accounted for. As interest in older never-marrieds grows, particularly never-married older women, we are finding more information on gender differences (Braito and Anderson, 1984).

Currently, however, there is very little existing data on the life experiences of never-married older women, and many questions are yet to be addressed: Are they subject to some of the common stereotypes of old age in addition to those associated with being never married? How have they coped with singlehood over a lifetime? How have they handled life changes and the aging process?

To explore these questions, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 never-married women, 80 years and over, living in community settings in Prince Edward Island. Price Edward Island is unique in that it has both the highest proportion of elderly (12.5% compared to the national rate of 10%) and of never-married women over 75 (15% according to the 1981 Census). The study had three purposes: to identify the personal, social and economic factors which might influ-
ence the never-married older woman's ability to deal with everyday living and the changes which occur with aging; to evaluate some of the common stereotypes of never-marrieds; and to identify the specific needs of this group as an aid to developing appropriate social policies.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative approach was used. This utilized the participants understanding and interpretation of the decision making processes, life events and conflicts which shaped their lives. Further, it allowed for examination of the attitudes and assumptions that lay behind those processes. This study is therefore concerned with subjective indicators regarding life satisfaction and well being as reported by respondents.

An initial questionnaire was administered to gather demographic data. That was followed by a series of three to four interviews of an hour each with each participant. Various phases of the women's lives were reviewed, taking into account the historical aspects of the time. The influence of social, economic, religious and political currents, as they related to women in particular, were also examined. These interviews were taped and later transcribed.

Participants were selected through contacts with professionals in the field of aging and through non-professional acquaintances. Contacts were asked to recommend women who were over the age of 80, never married, living independently and perceived as having a positive attitude toward life. The age of 80 was selected as a criterion since it is at this time of life that chronic conditions prevalent in old age begin having the greatest effect on the lives of older persons in general, and older women in particular, who experience more chronic illnesses than do men (Verbrugge, 1976).

Demographic and background data from the initial, structured interviews were summarized quantitatively and examined for typical and unique responses. Transcripts of the open-ended interviews were examined and the following categories were selected for data analysis: Reflections and views on childhood, family and community relationships; work life and career development; self-perceptions as a person and as a single woman; problems and satisfactions experienced; adjustments to life-changes and the experience of aging.