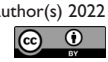
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# Affective Intensities of Single Lives: An Alternative Account of Temporal Aspects of Couple Normativity

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**Marjo Kolehmainen**
Tampere University, Finland

**Annukka Lahti**
University of Eastern Finland, Finland

**Anu Kinnunen**
The Social Insurance Institution of Finland, Finland

## Abstract

The number of people living without a partner is growing globally, but this demographic shift has barely disrupted the tenacity of the couple norm. Researchers have identified several concrete mechanisms of singlism – practices that feed the unequal treatment of single people. Nevertheless, there is still a need to develop an understanding of how singlism operates affectively. To provide insights into the affective intensities of single lives, we incorporate the notion of affective inequality into an analysis of singlehood and temporality, bringing together a range of data sets to further develop this idea. We examine the varying affective and psychic experiences that characterise how singles feel about their singlehood, how they experience the current moment and how they view the future. We argue that these experiences are shaped by singlism, and that affective inequalities and affective privileges co-condition the possibilities for different types of relationships.

## Keywords

affective inequality, affective intensity, couple normativity, singlehood, singlism, temporality

## Introduction

In this article, we bring together explorations of singlehood, affect and temporality to provide new insights into alternative intimacies. Our initial idea was to explore the

**Corresponding author:**
Marjo Kolehmainen, Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, Linna 5084, Tampere, 33014, Finland.
Email: marjo.kolehmainen@tuni.fi

affective intensities of single lives, which do not follow the 'happiness highlights' of the normative life course such as finding 'the one', getting married and remaining 'happily ever after' in a monogamous relationship – milestones widely considered to be signs of adulthood and maturity (DePaulo and Morris, 2005; Halberstam, 2005; Lahad, 2017). Moreover, as several feminist and queer scholars have pointed out, the progression of this normative life course is heteronormative, as it hierarchically elevates committed couple relationships, reproduction and 'family time' above alternative ways of organising time and life events (Ahmed, 2010b; Halberstam, 2005; Lahad, 2017). In order to provide more nuanced insights into single lives, we seek to develop theoretical tools to incorporate the notion of affective inequality into the analysis of singlehood and temporality. To further develop this idea, we bring together a range of data sets comprising writings by singles, media coverage of singlehood and interview data. For our theorising, we draw upon and combine sociological and cultural studies of singlehood, couple normativity and temporality (Halberstam, 2005; Lahad, 2017; Roseneil, 2006, 2007), and affect theory (Ahmed, 2010a, 2010b; Kolehmainen and Juvonen, 2018).

The increase in the number of singles is a significant phenomenon: the number of people living independently, without a partner in the same household, is growing globally (Eurostat, 2020; Klineberg, 2012; Yeung and Cheung, 2015). Nordic countries have particularly high proportions of singles (Gordon, 1994; Henriksson, 2019). In Finland, which is the site of this study, in 2018 a total of 1,191,000 households – that is, 44% of all households – comprised just one person (Suomen virallinen tilasto, 2019). As growing numbers of people live independently without a partner, it is becoming more common in postmodern western societies to organise one's relational life according to principles other than the traditional arrangements of marriage and cohabiting couple relationships – for example, giving networks of friends a central place in intimate life (Roseneil, 2006, 2007). However, the aforementioned demographic change has only partially disrupted the tenacity of the couple norm: the couple remains one of the most potent objects of normativity in contemporary European societies (Roseneil et al., 2020; see also Kolehmainen and Juvonen, 2018; Lahti, 2019).

Despite these shifts, there is a paucity of research on singlehood (Kolehmainen et al., 2020). While a few studies have explored people living alone, singlehood cannot be reduced to this aspect, since there are singles who live in shared households with friends or children. Moreover, looking at those who live alone does not necessarily provide knowledge about the couple norm or the potential effects of its grip, as many who live alone have non-residential partners. As a consequence of the couple norm, singlehood is often understood through negation: as lack, absence or defect (Budgeon, 2015; Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003; Simpson, 2016). This becomes evident when singles – particularly women – are expected to give reasons for their singlehood (Lahad, 2017). Being single thus bears the hallmarks of a 'problem identity', as singles are supposed to explain and justify why they are single (Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003) and have to negotiate the stigmatised status of singleness (Budgeon, 2008). Further, even young girls consider singlehood a problem that is 'caused' by something – and thus can be 'fixed' by conforming to conventional ideals of femininity (Vickery, 2009).

The processes of stigmatisation, marginalisation and discrimination against persons who are single is named *singlism* (DePaulo, 2006). This concept originates from the pioneering research on singlism by DePaulo and Morris (2005). Researchers have identified several concrete mechanisms of singlism, which manifests itself in various facets of life including housing, wages and unequal access to services and benefits (DePaulo, 2006; Lahad, 2017). In Finland, singlism has not been recognised to a large degree (Kolehmainen et al., 2020), even though singles are not entitled to the same tax reductions or unemployment benefit thresholds as those who are married, and cannot access the widows' pension that married people receive when their spouse dies. Further, until recently aspiring single mothers in Finland were denied access to publicly funded fertility treatment. The couple norm also operates in realms beyond state power, policy and law – in social relationships and interactions, and in cultural expectations and injunctions and the pressure and stigma they produce (Roseneil et al., 2020: 27). In other words, singlism is also about exclusionary and unequalising practices that may go unnoticed in the unfolding of everyday life.

In our study, we focus on the need to develop tools to understand how singlism operates affectively. It is necessary not only to recognise the concrete mechanisms of exclusion and discrimination, but also to look at affective inequalities. By *affect*, we refer not only to emotion but also to embodied and non-conscious ways of experiencing, knowing and remembering (Blackman, 2010; Seigworth and Gregg, 2010). Conventional analyses fail to grasp the affective mediation of power, which operates under the radar (Kolehmainen and Juvonen, 2018). In this article, we bring together the interdisciplinary field of research on singles and pioneering studies of affective inequality (e.g. Kolehmainen and Kinnunen, 2020) to produce new knowledge about singlehood. Previous research has indicated that singles suffer from feelings of insecurity, anxiety, jealousy and shame (Gordon, 1994; Heimtun, 2010; Morris and Munt, 2018), and although we wish to avoid making negative associations with singlehood, we acknowledge that non-conformity is productive of shame, guilt and anxiety (Roseneil et al., 2020). This is relevant because it is rare for singlehood to be politicised or for the inequalities single people face to be addressed, which in turn makes it challenging to claim singlehood as a positive, even progressive political identity (Kolehmainen et al., 2020) – an identity that might aid the fight against negative associations and affects, in the same way as LGBTIQA+ identities have done, for example. However, it would be misleading to see affective reactions merely as individual or collective responses that straightforwardly point to wider power relations.

By *affective inequalities* we refer to a specific form of those subtle mechanisms of inequality, that are generated and registered through affect. In the study of singlehood, affective inequalities are about both such accumulated personal experiences that stem from being single, and about those collective experiences that stem from couple-normative society. Affective inequalities also manifest in the dismissal of single people's well-being and in tendencies to question the happiness of solo living. Further, we assume that affective inequalities are manifest at different times and with varying intensities in the lives of single people. Hence, it is necessary to look critically at how normative temporal

assumptions are constructed (Lahad, 2017). Of course, ideals such as finding 'the one', getting married and living 'happily ever after' do not reflect many people's lives or wishes. Yet even if intimate life has become a matter of reflection and 'choice' in contemporary western societies following its individualisation and democratisation (e.g. Giddens, 1992), romantic relationships have increased in importance as sources of validation, meaning and security (Barker and Langdridge, 2010). Moreover, imagining alternative intimate futures is not simple, but requires reflexivity and emotional work (Holmes et al., 2021).

Examining singlehood through the lens of temporality provides especially salient insights into the affective textures of single lives. Even if everyday life is presumed by nature to be mundane and unremarkable, its deeper exploration reveals that what is mundane for one person may be extraordinary for another (Scott, 2009). Following this idea, we expect a focus on temporality to offer interesting viewpoints onto the diversity of single lives. In this article we extend the exploration of time by following affect-theoretical thinking. From this perspective, affective temporality is slippery, ill-defined, constantly moving and hence intangible; it therefore complicates and confuses linear temporality (Coleman, 2017). This approach provides a fruitful lens onto singlehood in all its complexity. To sum up, in this article we wish not only to identify how affective inequality works across single lives, but also to make visible the pleasurable, joyful and happy moments of alternative intimacies. However, we also expand the discussion of singlehood, affect and temporality in ways that do not reduce the analysis of time to predefined events and moments or recognisable rhythms.

Finally, in this article we employ an intersectional analysis and analyse such data that shed light onto men's and LGBTIQA+ people's experiences concerning singlehood in particular. Intersectionality as a term was first introduced by Crenshaw (1989), who examined how both feminist and anti-racist discourses failed to take into account experiences of women of colour as positioned simultaneously as women and as black. However, intersecting differences do not only count for the marginalised groups but also shape the experiences of the privileged ones (Staunæs, 2003). Hence, we wish to advance an intersectional approach to the study of singlehood, on one hand meaning a commitment to consider the intersecting differences – here especially gender, sexuality and age – when exploring singlehood, and recognising the coupled status as one potential intersecting difference among the more routinely applied social categorisations, on the other. We consider this kind of research design valuable for two reasons: first, the previous research on singlehood has focused on white middle-class straight women. Second, even those studies that promote the importance of considering multiple intersecting differences simultaneously do recurrently ignore the coupled status as one axis of privilege and discrimination.

## Data and Methodology

As mentioned above, for the purposes of this study we mobilise an intersectional take on singlehood and analyse such data that shed light onto other single people's experiences than those of white, middle-class straight women. Thus, in order to meet these aims, we analyse three different kinds of data: autobiographical writings by single men

(2018–2019); interviews with recently separated LGBTIQA+ people (2018–2021) and a longitudinal set of interviews with bisexual women and their partners (2005 and 2014–2015); and media coverage of singlehood (2017–2018). We acknowledge that the data sets are qualitatively different, however, we do not see this as a problem, especially since we are not seeking to compare them (see also Lahti and Kolehmainen, 2020). Rather, as the couple norm varies by time and place and between different social groups (Roseneil et al., 2020: 26), we hoped that these different data sets might shed light on some differences and nuances among different sites and groups to support our intersectional approach.

The singles' writings (indicated by 'MW' in data extracts below) were collected through an open online invitation to write about the highs and lows of single life. The invitation was published on a family and society-related blog and shared on social media. Men were chosen as the target group because single men are reported to be less happy than single women (Kinnunen and Kontula, 2021). As a result, 19 single men aged 29–62 years responded to the invitation. The men were mostly long-term singles. Four of them said they had never had a relationship; five had been single for more than eight years. Their sexual orientation was not asked about, but the writings referred exclusively to women as potential or past partners. The length of the writings varied from half a page to three-and-a-half pages, and all were in Finnish. They were collected through *Penna*, a tool for anonymous data collection.

The interview data consist of two data sets: 30 interviews with LGBTIQA+ people who had experienced a recent relationship separation (indicated by 'SI'), and a longitudinal set comprising five (originally seven) couple interviews with bisexual women and their variously gendered partners in 2005 plus 11 follow-up interviews in 2014–2015 (indicated by 'BI'). In the bisexual data set, participants were aged 22–42 at the time of the first interview and 32–52 at the follow-up. By the time of the follow-up interviews, the majority of the couples interviewed in 2005 had separated, and most interviewees had new partners; however, they also gave accounts of their experiences of being single. In the separation interviews, participants were aged 28–59. Of the 30 interviewees, 17 identified as women, four identified as non-binary gendered and six said their official gender was female but reflected on their gender in various ways. Of the three male participants, one had gone through a trans process, and one said that they would officially tick 'male' but did not like categorisations. Most of the separated interviewees had repartnered within a few years or months after the break-up, but some had remained single for several years, and most gave accounts of their experiences of being single. Both data sets consist of in-depth interviews conducted in Finnish cities and towns. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, 22 of the separation interviews were conducted via Zoom. The interviews lasted between one and four hours. They were audio-recorded and transcribed.

The newspaper data consist of 40 articles on singlehood published in the regional newspaper *Aamulehti* (indicated by 'AL'). *Aamulehti* is the biggest newspaper in the Pirkanmaa region. It is also one of the most popular newspapers in the whole of Finland, reaching an average of 680,000 readers (Media Audit Finland, 2019). The newspaper data were originally gathered for a study on public debates concerning singlehood in Finland, for which articles from two broadsheet newspapers and one tabloid were analysed (Kolehmainen et al., 2020). The data were collected from the data archive

*Suomen Media-arkisto*, using three different search terms ('single', 'singlehood' and 'living alone'). Altogether, the search produced 260 hits during the chosen period of 1 January 2017 to 31 December 2018. Of those hits, articles that did not discuss singlehood (e.g. where 'single' referred to a music recording, or where singlehood was mentioned only in passing in, for example, event announcements or information about TV programmes) were removed. For the purposes of this study, the data were re-examined from a new perspective.

When we started data analysis, we were striving to explore ways to grasp the affective intensities of single life that did not follow the 'happiness highlights' of the normative life course. Therefore, when we first analysed the data, we especially looked for descriptions of temporality, time and rhythms. Nevertheless, our analysis was not limited to linguistic categories and expressions; rather, we were interested in different affective intensities, from 'ordinary' affects to affective peaks. The rhythms of bodies, practices and texts are important for identifying such intensities (see Knudsen and Stage, 2015). We then discussed the data together from this perspective. However, we ultimately rejected our initial focus on highs and lows, since our interpretations diverged from that focus. Instead, we noticed that many of the most interesting findings were about temporality and the future, rather than about particular moments. In the second stage, we centred our analysis on the three themes that form the outline of what follows: movement between the past and the future; affective inequality in everyday life; and open-ended becomings of single lives.

## Movement Between the Past and the Future

Singles have varying life situations, with different backgrounds and future expectations. However, the cultural association between acceptable singlehood and young adulthood (Lahad, 2017) was identifiable in our data. For instance, the following text is from a newspaper readers' contribution page where readers can debate issues and offer their own opinions. It articulates cultural imaginaries concerning the life course by stating how becoming single in later life goes against all expectations:

> In my case, life as a single started when I was retired, when my ex-spouse found a new love and all of a sudden made an announcement about moving away and filing for divorce. It had not occurred to me that a man of his age, after more than 40 years of marriage, would start actively searching for a new partner. (AL, 22 January 2018)

Also, the youngest authors of the men's writings were transitioning from young adulthood to adulthood: their single status was becoming visible as they aged. Some men had only become single recently, whereas others had never had a partner. In most of their writings, a wish for a partner was articulated, but it was not framed in the vocabulary of waiting as with single women, whose lives are often associated with waiting (Lahad, 2017). Instead, short-term single men in particular associated singlehood with freedom. For instance, Sami claimed that 'after an unsuccessful marriage, I know how to appreciate my own time and independence' (MW). References to freedom are a way to negotiate one's status as single and to ascribe value and power to oneself (Budgeon, 2008; Roseneil, 2006), so the

tendency to stress freedom can be seen as a way to assert one's status after a relationship break-up.

Similarly, separated LGBTIQA+ interviewees who were living as single after long relationships often regarded their singlehood as freedom. Unlike everyday negotiations with one's partner, this new situation meant more freedom in one's daily life: for instance, the option to decorate one's home as one wished, to decide one's own standards of cleanliness and to choose how to spend one's time. In the interviews with bisexual women, the accounts of living out one's sexuality as one wished after becoming single were often affectively very intense. There was an exhilarating feel to participants' experiences of sexual encounters with more than one partner, which had often not been possible in their previous, monogamous relationships (Lahti, 2019). This was also present in the writings of single men: 'Life without a steady relationship has been the happiest time of my life. . . . I don't have a steady relationship, since I have female friends with whom can I live out both emotional intimacy and erotics very well' (MW, Martti).

It seems that becoming single after a long-term relationship is often initially experienced as an energising escape from monogamy and the constraining repetitions of 'couple's time'. Yet affectively intense, exhilarating descriptions of sexual encounters were often temporally bound to the present. In particular, bisexual women often anticipated an end to their pleasurable sexual encounters, which resonates with the ways in which single women in general avoid being stigmatised as 'too' sexual (see Budgeon, 2008; Lahti, 2019). As Anna said: 'I'm not expecting this to go on forever' (BI). The implication was that it was a little too much, after all, for a woman to have this much sex with different partners (Lahti, 2018). Krista concluded: 'I woke up to reality ((laughing a little)), like, this is not my thing' (BI).

No similar experiences of 'breaking free' appeared in the writings of long-term single men who had little or no experience of dating. When one has no experience of what it is like not to be 'free', freedom has no point of reference, and it seems difficult to take up a critical distance from the pros and cons of being coupled. Long-term unwanted singleness was particularly seen to lead to depression in some writings, and to a certain kind of dullness, with flattened emotions. A 34-year-old lifelong single who felt lonely and sometimes depressed writes:

> I think that I'm not good enough for a woman in any sense of the word: not as an object of desire, nor as a reliable partner or a man that makes a woman happy. Nowadays I've more or less got used to the feelings caused by not being in a relationship, and somehow I've accepted that I'll never end up in a relationship. Still, I'm afraid of how I'll feel about myself, for example at the age of 60, if I've missed out completely on the life experience of being part of a couple. (MW, Kim)

Kim's account is not exceptional: even those who had hardly any dating experience viewed couple relationships in a very positive light. Ahmed (2010a) writes that a couple relationship is a cultural object with a strong affective promise of happiness, adding that an object can evoke pleasure even if we do not have first-hand experience of it. A couple relationship holds strong expectations of reciprocity, intimacy, continuity, stability and equality (Jurva and Lahti, 2019), and these are almost taken for granted by many single men.

Kim imagined that a couple relationship would give him a more meaningful life. This clearly illustrates how being part of a couple is widely both seen and felt to be an achievement (Roseneil et al., 2020: 4), and Kim's account can be seen as an affective response to his 'failure' in this regard.

The writers did not report any attempts to make themselves over in order to find a partner. Only one, Mikko, stressed that difficult issues that had placed a strain on his life 'have got significantly better in the past years, thanks to my psychotherapy'(MW). Often the writers echoed the cultural discourse concerning women's high expectations: in Finland, single women are frequently framed as 'too demanding'. Yet even in such cases, the men did not express a particular willingness to change. Interestingly, previous research on heterosexual relationships has noted that women are expected to be flexible and adjust their needs according to their partner (e.g. Gunnarsson, 2014). In other words, women are asked to lower their standards and not demand too much from their partner (Jurva and Lahti, 2019), which might explain this.

When singleness is so strongly seen as a result of one's personal qualities – or mainly as a lack of certain qualities – it can create feelings of unworthiness and loneliness as well as an outsider experience. These feelings may already be familiar from earlier life experiences. Teemu recalled his first schooldays, when he wanted to join other children in the playground: 'Very soon, I noticed that I would not be able to enter their play. That is when my social comedown started' (MW). Mikko associated bullying with his status as a single person: 'All originating from my childhood, especially from being bullied at school' (MW). Peer relations, especially friendships, were also referred to in men's writings as a source of happiness, but when old friends got coupled and had less time to meet, singlehood was felt and experienced in a new manner. Nevertheless, the feelings described in several writings can be seen as continuations of childhood experiences. Thus, although being single is often understood as a current status, in our data there are also many accounts that provide an alternative temporal understanding of singlehood.

## Affective Inequality in Everyday Life: The Unequalising Rhythms of Day-to-Day Life

Based on our data, it seems that there are certain days and moments when being single certainly makes itself felt and singlism is experienced as particularly intense. For instance, from the perspective of many single people, Sundays and Christmas are both 'affective peaks' (Kinnunen and Kolehmainen, 2019; Knudsen and Stage, 2015) that feel different and have a strong affective charge compared with other times. In post-industrial developed countries, the rhythms of everyday life are shaped by the distinction between work and leisure. Although there has been a shift towards increasing weekend work, weekends in European societies have long been viewed as sacrosanct: a hard-won workers' right, and dedicated time for leisure, rest and the family (Ruppanner and Treas, 2014). In these countries Sundays are often spent with family, meaning that Sundays have their own affective texture for both those who have families and those who live alone or are single. In particular, middle-class weekends tend to be very child-centred (Wheeler, 2014).

In Finland, Sundays are used for rest, and people socialise less on Sundays nowadays compared with a few decades ago (Anttila et al., 2015), which may render singles more prone to loneliness. For instance, Arthur stated that Sundays were especially distressing: 'To put it briefly, it is great not to have a couple relationship on Friday evenings but utterly distressing on Sunday evenings' (MW). A similar case was provided by a newspaper interview with a woman who had divorced some years before. The newspaper published her story on Christmas Eve, a date that is itself entangled with the collective rhythms of western societies. In the interview, she thought back on her changed life situation, as she was now on her own. She particularly mentioned 'long Sundays', highlighting that time is experienced personally and from a specific angle. Yet again, her remark draws attention to how the experience of being single may change literally from day to day.

Holidays are special periods that people are supposed to spend with family and friends, thus making singlehood and the possible lack of meaningful social ties hypervisible (Jamieson and Simpson, 2013). In the interview, the Christmas season in particular was seen as a painful period for singles. The interviewed woman described how the first Christmas after her separation was difficult; however, after a few years she had learned to enjoy the pre-Christmas period, and she described her experience of good, warm moments and of being able to 'just breathe', 'watch snowflakes floating' and not have to 'rush around in a sweat' doing the Christmas shopping:

> It was helpful to see that the piercing loneliness was evoked by a powerful desire for and image of a family Christmas, Kivelä says. Over the years, she has considered Christmas in a hotel, yet has shrunk from the feeling that a waiter in a restaurant might take pity on her, as if to say 'poor you, you are alone'. Or the experience of sitting next to a table where a whole family, grandmother included, was gathered together.
>
> Loneliness is associated with shame and stigma. Many have lamented for me, like, 'oh dear, will you be all alone on Christmas?' Certainly, many who live alone force themselves to socialise during Christmas and just count time until the bank holidays are over. (AL, 24 December 2018)

The interviewee's withdrawal from a hotel visit clearly illustrates the complex and nuanced operations of singlism, and the consequent affective burden. She was not uncomfortable with eating alone per se; rather, it was the notion of becoming the object of a waiter's pity that dissuaded her from the option of Christmas in a hotel. As Hemmings (2012) writes, emotional and affective engagements can reinforce hierarchies. Using empathy as an example, she explains that empathy is usually only given to those perceived to be in need – those with less power or fewer resources. Consequently, empathy fails to address the enjoyment of authority and judgement that remains with the one who empathises (Hemmings, 2012). The newspaper interviewee recognised pity as a hierarchical relation, as is indicated by her firm refusal to become the object of such pity. This description of a situation where there is a risk of becoming an object of pity thus demonstrates one of the ways in which singlism and affective inequality intertwine.

Further, the imagined experience of dining alone draws attention to the relationality of affect (e.g. Kolehmainen and Juvonen, 2018). Affect is not about personal, subjective

feelings or individual reactions (Kolehmainen and Juvonen, 2018). Rather, it draws attention to relations between bodies, and to the bodily in/capacities to affect and become affected. Affecting and becoming affected emerge in and through encounters between bodies and things (Kolehmainen and Juvonen, 2018). Indeed, the newspaper article draws attention to the ways in which the affectively intense experience of not wanting to eat Christmas dinner alone does not originate from individual emotions: it is the possibility of encounters, and the anticipation of other people's feelings, that holds the interviewee back. A previous study exploring single women's experiences noted that the women felt loneliest when eating out – even though many knew that the couples or families around them were not necessarily any happier (Heimtun, 2010).

In a similar vein, Greta, a separated, middle-aged lesbian who had been single for several years before repartnering, described comparisons between her own single status and others' relationships as a source of distress:

> At times you can describe it with the word despair. Looking [for a partner] all the time. Do I know anybody else who is single? One cannot help but compare oneself with people who one thinks are more successful than oneself . . . It requires so much self-assurance to think that it doesn't matter, why do I compare [myself with others]? I am who I am. (SI, Greta)

The portrayal of singlehood as an undesired status is rarely questioned in the data, and Greta's characterisation of coupled people as 'more successful' and her repeated attempts to find a partner resonate with wider cultural articulations of singlehood as a defect (e.g. Budgeon, 2008). Even in the public discussion of LGBTIQA+ rights during recent decades, which has largely concentrated on 'family rights', queer desire is made intelligible mainly through couple relationships. This can exacerbate single LGBTIQA+ people's feelings of 'having failed': in Greta's case, her strenuous affective efforts to maintain a positive sense of self were tangible.

However, sometimes interviewees had become aware of the specificity of their coupled everyday lives only after they had become single: as Scott (2009) asserts, one person's ordinariness can be extraordinary for someone else. In particular, coupled people seem to take for granted the everyday support they receive from their partners, which appears remarkable only in hindsight:

> All of a sudden, when I was alone and had to take care of everything alone, I pondered . . . Did it feel somehow heavier because I had never needed before to decide everything myself or take care of everyday life myself? Like, it was only after the break-up when I realised how much I had shared everything with the other person, when she wasn't there any more to share it with me. (SI, Emma)

This excerpt shows that single people face temporal inequalities that are not bound only to certain days or times; rather, they hide in the thick and repetitious temporality of everyday life. It is often in this process of the 'happening' of the everyday that unequalising forms of power come to matter (Stewart, 2007), such as single people's lack of the everyday support that may be taken for granted in other life situations.

## Exciting Times? Open-Ended Becomings of Single Lives

Just as single people have varying experiences and expectations, so their orientations towards the future also differ significantly. Many consider singlehood a 'phase' that will ultimately head towards coupledom. In the men's writings and the separation interviews with LGBTIQA+ people, the expectation that their singlehood would eventually end also meant that participants did not feel particularly bad about being single: 'I don't need to be sad that I don't have a partner, because I know that it is going to pass, someday it will change' (MW, Pentti). However, this expectation was only afforded to those who had been in committed couple relationships – and not even all of those shared this trust in repartnering. Among those without this temporal binding of anticipated future relationships, the temporality of singlehood was accounted for as unstructured time that could, at least in principle, be spent in innumerable ways. Marta, a separated lesbian woman, scolded herself for not making anything life-changing out of this horizon of possibilities:

> Now when I can, I have thrown in . . . my own things. Of course there could be more of those, one could go and try, if I go to Pilates in the autumn, I could go to archery in the spring, like, go on and try different things. . . . But I haven't excelled myself in any way. That I would go beyond my comfort zone. I don't know, that I would go to circus school or something. (SI, Marta)

Marta's words illustrate what Diane Vaughan (1979) has described as 'uncoupling': unravelling the social identity one has created along with another person, and redefining oneself as a separate person apart from one's partner. Coupledom is saturated with expectations regarding what couples do together in their everyday lives, and how their time is structured (Halberstam, 2005). Although the everyday repetitions of 'couple time' might even be depicted as dull, such everyday rhythms structure and bind time, as Marta's reflections demonstrated. Indeed, the everyday temporality of singlehood is depicted as much more unstructured and open to different possibilities, and thus more difficult to contain (Roseneil, 2006). The freedom that interviewees embraced on one hand could be hard to deal with on the other:

> It's like, should I take up smoking a pipe, or what? . . . Should I go this autumn with these hobbies and work arrangements and social events that I have already fixed? The time span is somehow like that . . . different . . . I don't know what the bait could be. What kind of bait to throw to the future. What is the time curve of the future? (SI, Marta)

Marta compared the 'bits and pieces' of her current life with the different temporality of the normative life course, which provides certain future trajectories (Halberstam, 2005). There is a strong cultural expectation that relationships should be 'going somewhere' (Roseneil, 2006), even if that may no longer be about getting married and having children, but for instance about moving in with one's partner after having dated for a while. In single life there are no similarly culturally recognisable or shared milestones. As Marta noted, a relationship 'brings a long-term vision'.

For a single person, there are no ready-made answers regarding what to bind oneself to in everyday life or when one is thinking about one's future. Moreover, in heteronormative cultural depictions of singlehood, age is regarded as an important coordinate of successful timing (Lahad, 2017: 78). If a more unstructured use of time – for example, experimenting with different relationships – is seen as appropriate for young heterosexual single women, there is no ready-made cultural script for middle-aged single lesbians regarding the use of time. Finding a way to live the apparently very spacious time of singlehood can itself take time. Unconditional support from friends was especially significant for separated LGBTIQA+ people in this regard. Greta, who initially described her single life after her break-up as dull said that finding mundane rhythms of work and leisure, and long-term aspirations for the future, had eventually helped to bring joy:

> Little by little, joy and positivity started to enter my life. Very mundane things . . . like work and hobbies, I started to gain some life force. I applied for a study place and got it and . . . and started to save for a mortgage. (SI, Greta)

There were also other examples in our data sets where the future trajectories of single individuals were not bound to expected relationships or the lack of relationships. Emma recalled how she had decided to become an independent mother: 'After the break-up I noticed . . . that it was baby fever that bothered me, rather than yearning for a partner or a spouse. And then I decided to take the lead and have a baby on my own' (SI, Emma). Choosing to be an independent mother is anticipated to be a growing trend in Finland. For instance, in 2019 roughly 10% of the mothers of children conceived in fertility clinics were unmarried (THL, 2020). Hence, Emma's decision was not exceptional. In a somewhat similar vein in the following extract, finding a partner and having children are temporally separated through the decision to freeze one's eggs. Choices like this – although mainly available to certain populations, such as youngish, well-off women – can certainly be seen as affective responses to the pressures women may face, as couple normativity has different salience and potency for different genders and different times in people's lives, particularly in relation to the idea of the 'biological clock' (see Roseneil et al., 2020: 29). Yet such choices also illustrate that individuals can 'queer' normative expectations (see Holmes et al., 2021) such as the idea that partnering and reproduction should temporally overlap. In the following excerpt, a newspaper interviewee accounts for her decision to freeze her eggs:

> By freezing egg cells I was able to get extra time to search for a well-matched partner and to plan to have children. If I can't conceive by natural means, it is a relief to know that I can use my own eggs. (AL, 1 January 2017)

While choosing independent motherhood or freezing eggs relates to certain life goals, in the data there were also accounts of how singlehood nurtured individual flourishing without similarly structured time frames. Our last example shows that the 'open' time of singlehood can also provide fruitful means for self-actualisation and personal fulfilment – both perceived as positive sides of singlehood (see Budgeon, 2008). Jana, a non-binary-gendered queer person, described how being single had enabled their creativeness:

> [I]n my psyche, there have happened so many good things. I have started to peel away the long and thick layer that was present all the time during my last relationship. . . . And then the creativity came, started to raise its head, and it has been carrying me over the past year. It is an incredible strength, which I have found during the last year in writing. (SI, Jana)

Baraitser (2017) describes the time that does not follow expected linear and developmental trajectories as 'unbecoming time', because it is time without specific boundaries and thus seems infinite. In the data, examples of this kind of time without specific boundaries were associated with singleness, but the people in question experienced 'unbecoming time' in varying ways. For some, life without a partner meant a shift in future orientation in ways that made any future plans vague. However, some were discovering and exploring novel things in their lives, or investing in making their dreams come true.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have brought together explorations of singlehood, affect and temporality to provide new insights into alternative intimacies. Our research design advanced an intersectional take on singlehood, and we found that social differences such as age, sexuality and gender do play a key role in the temporal experiences of singlehood. While it was more acceptable to be single in young adulthood, the accumulation of life experiences with age enabled critical reflections of the normative coupled life. Yet, especially in men's life the unwanted long-term singlehood often led to feelings of unworthiness and an outsider experience. While this could be true for LGBTQIA+ women as well, for them, singlehood eventually – after potentially difficult periods – provided means for self-actualisation and personal fulfilment. For long-term single men it proved harder to make their life over. Thus, whether we are talking about short-term or long-term singlehood makes a crucial difference, too. Those who had been recently separated recalled ecstatic experiences in their everyday lives as they found pleasure in a new kind of freedom, even if these had a strong temporal flavour and were expected to pass soon. Further, long-term singles rarely associated being single with such experiences. For them, single life was more of a mundane state, and many were hoping to find a partner. Beyond experiences of the recently separated, no alternative collective highlights were to be found – as initially we were interested in the highs and lows of single life – which we see as telling of the grip of the couple norm. Instead, we found a few collective 'lows': singlism was experienced as particularly intense, for instance, on Sundays and over Christmas because these were considered to be days to spend with one's partner or family.

Further, we consequently argued that singlism also operates through affective inequalities. *Affective inequalities* describes the ways in which inequalities are shaped and accumulate in everyday affective encounters and in their interpretations and judgements (Kolehmainen and Juvonen, 2018). There are varying affective and psychic experiences that characterise how singles feel about their singlehood, how they experience the current moment and how they orientate themselves towards the future. For many who remain long-term single against their own wishes, 'feel' for the future is tied to their anticipation of failing to meet a partner. In contrast, for many who become single after a committed couple relationship, an implicit trust that they will repartner and experience

continued proximity is tangible. It seems that having a history of being in relationships provides a certain bodily and affective way of relating, and one can easily continue on this path in the future too (Clough, 2013; Walkerdine, 2015). Hence, singlism conditions those experiences whose accumulation produces affective inequalities or affective privileges. As affects mark belonging as well as non-belonging (Kolehmainen and Juvonen, 2018; Seigworth and Gregg, 2010), affective intensities foster the conditions for different types of relationships – or their absence – thus underlining the entanglements of affect and singlism.

Despite the differences between long-term singles and those who had experienced committed couple relationships, we further suggest that singlehood in general is fruitful to conceptualise as open time. Singlehood does not have recognisable boundaries or culturally celebrated milestones (Lahad, 2017), and it therefore has a certain 'openness', especially when there is no anticipation of a future relationship. In light of our data, this openness can be seen as an opportunity to do whatever one wants. Yet the infinite time of singlehood, with its innumerable possibilities, is also difficult to contain (see also Roseneil, 2006). On one hand, there is an openness to alternative ways of living everyday life, and to diverse affective intensities, but on the other, without normative temporal binds on how one uses one's time, the affective intensities of everyday singlehood can also be scattered or flattened. Nonetheless, being single provides possibilities to learn to be and flourish on one's own, with increasing affective intensities and vitality. Over time, many of our informants found ways to build lives that offered personal fulfilment. It is through affective inequalities and affective privileges that this 'open time' is actualised in single people's lives.

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## ORCID iD

Marjo Kolehmainen https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2949-2638

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Marjo Kolehmainen is a Postdoctoral Researcher in Gender Studies at Tampere University. She is working on the project Intimacy in Data-Driven Culture, funded by The Strategic Research Council at the Academy of Finland. Her current research concerns digital therapy and counselling in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. She has published articles in *Gender & Society*, *Science, Technology, and Human Values*, *Body & Society* and *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, to name a few. Moreover, she is a co-editor of *Affective Inequalities in Intimate Relationships* (Routledge, 2018).

Annukka Lahti is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Eastern Finland. In her postdoctoral project, 'Where the rainbow ends: The becoming of LGBTIQ+ separations in two cultural locations', she explores the relationship break-ups of queer, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex and asexual people through the theoretical lens of affect. She has studied the entanglements of intimacy, power, gender, sexuality and affect for several years and has published studies, for example, on affective inequalities, bisexuality, heterosexual relationship contexts and LGBTIQ+ break-ups. Her publications have appeared in the *Journal of Sociology*, *NORA*, *Subjectivity* and *Feminism & Psychology*, among others.

Anu Kinnunen is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Social Insurance Institution of Finland (Kela). Kinnunen defended her thesis on social and health policy at Tampere University. For her doctoral project, Kinnunen analysed the happiness factors of single men and women and contemplated how the discourses of the couple norm and individualistic culture are reflected in single lives. Her studies also include analyses of presentations of singles in the media. Her current research project is on parents' uses of their parental leave, their attitudes towards child care allowances and their ability to combine work and family.

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