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Coping or Thriving? Reviewing Intrapersonal, Interpersonal, and Societal Factors Associated With Well-Being in Singlehood From a Within-Group Perspective

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Abstract
Singlehood, defined as not being in a romantic relationship, is becoming increasingly common worldwide. Despite this, research on singlehood has not received remotely equivalent research attention as romantic relationships. Well-being research that has explicitly included singles has focused on whether coupled versus single people are more satisfied with their lives. However, these between-group comparisons have not attended to within-group variability among singles that can point to when and for whom singlehood is associated with thriving. In this review, we document findings from the emerging field of singlehood studies to highlight what is and is not known about factors that are associated with the well-being of single individuals from a within-group perspective. Our review examines (a) intrapersonal factors (characteristics of the individual), (b) interpersonal experiences (qualities of one's social relationships and experiences), and (c) societal influences (features related to one's broader social or cultural context) related to well-being in singlehood. We conclude by offering future directions for the conceptualization of and research on singlehood with the goal of promoting a thorough and inclusive perspective.

Keywords
individual differences, interpersonal relations, romantic relationships, singlehood, singlism, well-being

Single adults represent a fast-growing demographic worldwide and across the adult life span (United Nations, 2019). People are increasingly delaying romantic partnerships to pursue career goals and personal aspirations (Copen et al., 2012), divorce is more acceptable and common than it has been historically (Schoen & Canudas-Romo, 2006), rates of solo parenting are on the rise (Heuveline et al., 2003), and more people are choosing solo living (DePaulo, 2007; Kislev, 2019). Despite singlehood being an important part of most people's adult lives, the growing prevalence of singles in modern society, and long-standing calls for more "singleness studies" (Byrne & Carr, 2005; Stein, 1975), little research from a psychological perspective has focused on what factors are associated with living a more- or less-happy single life. This is particularly notable given that extant work and narratives about singlehood highlight that experiences of singlehood are tied to various aspects of individuals' lives, including happiness and well-being, stigma and discrimination, close and intimate relationships, sexual health and satisfaction, financial and economic outcomes, and mental and physical health (e.g., Adamczyk & Segrin, 2015b; DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Diener et al., 2000; Girme et al., 2022; Park et al., 2021; Pepping et al., 2018; Roelfs et al., 2011). Clearly, singlehood status and identity play an important role in shaping outcomes across different life domains.

One might expect that relationship scientists would have attended to the experiences of single individuals, not only in their own right but also as the inevitable

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Table 1. Summary of Between-group Versus Within-group Perspectives Toward Singlehood

Approach	Between-group perspective toward singlehood	Within-group perspective toward singlehood
Aim	Compares outcomes between single versus coupled people	Focuses on variation in experiences and outcomes among single people
Advantages	Reveal "on average" differences between single versus coupled people	Explores diverse and heterogeneous experiences among singles
Limitations	Can incorrectly lead to causal explanations attributed to relationship status and lead to deficit-based narratives and assumptions about singlehood	Can lead to assumptions that phenomena are unique to singlehood rather than more widely shared

precursor to entering at least one's first romantic relationship and the usual aftermath of ending one. Yet relationship science has focused largely on dynamics in romantic relationships within a limited range from early dating to committed relationships. Furthermore, singles who prefer singlehood and/or stay single for the long-term have fallen almost entirely out of the purview of relationship science despite singles' relational ties to family, friends, and broader social networks. Indeed, as relationship science attempted to establish its legitimacy as a field in a funding environment dominated by "family friendly" politicians, it would have been understandable if there had been structural incentives to ignore singles or even exaggerate single individuals' challenges and downplay their strengths to justify the investment of funding into researchers' work on romantic relationships.

In this light, it is perhaps not surprising that the attention paid to singles has largely been directed toward group differences in well-being between coupled versus single people. For example, several meta-analytic (Diener et al., 2000; Haring-Hidore et al., 1985) and longitudinal (Buecker et al., 2020; Purol et al., 2020; see meta-analysis by Luhmann et al., 2012) studies have suggested that, on average, single people tend to experience lower life satisfaction and subjective well-being compared with married/partnered people. Decades of research on health and mortality has also illustrated that single individuals have a greater mortality risk compared with married people (see meta-analyses by Roelfs et al., 2011, $N = 500$ million people; Manzoli et al., 2007, $N = 250{,}000$ older adults). However, with a few notable exceptions (Adamczyk, 2016; 2017a; Adamczyk & Segrin, 2015a, 2015b; Girme et al., 2016, 2021; Ta et al., 2017), most of these comparative studies have fallen short of examining why single individuals may be at risk for poorer subjective well-being and mental health and who among the single group might in fact be thriving. For example, cross-cultural comparisons have illustrated that the association between relationship status and well-being varies substantially across nations—such that nations showed positive effects (couples happier than singles), null effects (no differences between couples and singles), and even negative effects (singles happier than couples; see Lucas & Dyrenforth, 2005, $N \approx 170{,}000$ over 70 countries). Thus, as we highlight in Table 1, although these between-group comparisons might be helpful in identifying "on average" differences between singlehood and partnerships, these effects may (at times) be overstated, and interpretations of these studies may also be vulnerable to societal assumptions that cast being single as a less healthy way of living compared with romantic relationships (Byrne & Carr, 2005; Day et al., 2011) in a way that provides an incomplete picture of the state of modern singles.

Indeed, DePaulo and colleagues (DePaulo, 2007; DePaulo & Morris, 2005, 2006; Morris et al., 2008) have argued compellingly that the common research approach of contrasting single status with coupled (or married) status is not set up to provide a fair comparison and arguably echoes societal standards for how one "should" live. For example, one cannot be divorced without having been married, yet researchers do not typically ascribe the poorer well-being of divorced individuals to the damaging effects of marriage and partnership (DePaulo & Morris, 2005, 2006; Morris et al., 2008; also see Holt-Lunstad et al., 2008). Thus, the well-being benefits ascribed to romantic relationships in such research are confounded by the fact that people who are happy in relationships stay, whereas people who are unhappy with their relationships assume single status (DePaulo, 2007; DePaulo & Morris, 2005, 2006; Morris et al., 2008). In fact, when one examines well-being outcomes for individuals who have never been married, they are often comparable with those of married individuals (Greitemeyer, 2009; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2016). Of course, even these studies still adopted a between-group perspective by focusing on the argument that the well-being gap between single and coupled people is overstated.

One approach that has not focused on between-group comparison is studies tracking within-person trajectories in well-being across life events. These studies demonstrate that although people do experience significant increases in well-being following marriage (and declines following divorce), these changes are often short-lived, and many people eventually return to baseline levels of happiness (Buecker et al., 2020; Kalmijn, 2017; Musick & Bumpass, 2012; Soons et al., 2009; but cf. van Scheppingen & Leopold, 2020). A meta-analysis of within-person changes in well-being also suggests that people are happier right before they get married (160 effect sizes, $N = 9{,}292$) and unhappy right before they divorce (41 effect sizes, $N = 1{,}828$; Luhmann et al., 2012; also see Lucas et al., 2003). Thus, the happiness boosts associated with marriage (and lulls associated with divorce) are not caused by the coupling (or uncoupling) event per se but the circumstances leading up to these events. However, by focusing only on transitions into and out of singlehood, these studies are not well positioned to ask what we believe is a key question: Which characteristics of singles and their lives are associated with being more versus less happy within singlehood itself?

A Within-Group Perspective on Singlehood

To our knowledge, no reviews or commentaries to date have considered a within-group perspective on singlehood as a means of identifying diverse singlehood experiences and outcomes. However, as research on heterogeneity among singles increasingly emerges to identify when and for whom singlehood is associated with challenges and thriving (see Adamczyk, 2021), a clearer picture of what factors are associated with being a happy and healthy single person may be beginning to come to light. As described in Table 1, in this review, we take a within-group perspective toward singlehood and aim to document extant research to shed light on when and for whom singlehood is associated with positive personal and interpersonal experiences and when and for whom singlehood might be a source of personal and interpersonal stress. Although we position these outcomes as a binary for the sake of simplicity, we acknowledge that these experiences are not mutually exclusive and that single people may experience stressful and positive experiences simultaneously.

Although it is difficult to arrive at a unitary definition of the term "single" (for an excellent discussion of this issue, see Adamczyk, 2021), primarily when we use the term "single" throughout this review, we mean an individual who is not in a romantic relationship. We recognize that there will be subjectivity in people's judgments of whether they are partnered, and participants who describe themselves as single may include people who date casually and encompass both long-term and short-term singlehood.

We divide our review into three overarching categories of influences on single people's well-being: (a) intrapersonal factors (characteristics of the individual), (b) interpersonal experiences (qualities of one's social relationships and experiences), and (c) societal influences (features related to one's broader social or cultural context). We focus on these three factors because they have been identified by several seminal commentaries and reviews in psychology as central to understanding individuals' goals, values, needs, feelings, behaviors, and ultimately, consequential for well-being (e.g., Brewer, 1991; Finkel et al., 2017; Hong et al., 2016; Schwartz, 1994; Vallacher & Nowak, 2009). When focusing on "well-being," we predominantly refer to life satisfaction and satisfaction with singlehood because these are the outcomes that have received the most attention in singlehood studies (but when appropriate, we also highlight the few instances in which mental- and physical-health outcomes have been examined). We also identify important gaps in the literature and offer theoretical considerations for conducting research on singlehood with the goal of developing a thorough and inclusive research agenda for singlehood.

Finally, the replication crisis in psychology has raised important concerns regarding the evidentiary basis of a number of research literatures (e.g., Shrout & Rodgers, 2018). In narrative reviews such as ours, effects demonstrated in various studies are typically treated as holding equivalent evidentiary value regardless of the soundness of the research design, such as the degree of statistical power underlying the study's findings. Of course, it can be a challenge in a broad, narrative review to be detailed about each study's methodology while simultaneously making the overarching narrative succinct and digestible. As one attempt to provide some information about the credibility of studies contained in the current review in a succinct way, we have provided a sample size for most of the studies we discuss. Sample size is an imperfect measure of a study's statistical power because power can be strongly influenced by a number of factors aside from sample size, such as whether the analyses conducted are between-persons or within-persons (and in an individual article, the analyses may switch back and forth between these). Nevertheless, we feel that providing sample sizes provides at least some heuristic clues as to how strong the evidentiary basis for the studies described in our review are.

Table 2. Summary of Intrapersonal Factors, Interpersonal Experiences, and Societal Influences That Are Associated With Well-Being Among Single People

Factors associated with higher well-being in singlehood	Factors associated with lower well-being in singlehood
Intrapersonal factors	Intrapersonal factors
• Attachment security	• Attachment anxiety
• Social-avoidance goals[a]	• Attachment avoidance[b]
• Lower desire for a partner	• Higher fear of being single
• Older age	• Higher desire for a partner
Interpersonal experiences	Interpersonal experiences
• Having never been in a romantic relationship/ never been married	• Being divorced
• Greater perceived social support and integration	• Lack of perceived social support
• High perceived quality friendships	• Family pressure to couple/marry
• Lower sexual desire	• Higher sexual desire combined with infrequent partnered sexual experiences
• Higher sexual desire combined with frequent partnered sexual experiences	
Societal Influences	Societal Influences
• Endorsement of post-materialist values	• Endorsement of marriage and family ideology
	• Stigma and discrimination ("singlism")
	• Traditional norms about gender and parenthood

[a]Although social-avoidance goals tend to be associated with personal and interpersonal costs (see Gable, 2006), Girme and colleagues (2016, *N*s = 187 and 4,024) identified one context in which this may not always be the case; when single people are higher in social-avoidance goals, they reported higher life satisfaction than single people lower in social-avoidance goals.
[b]MacDonald and Park (2022, *N* = 1,930) found that although attachment avoidance was associated with lower life satisfaction, it was not associated with satisfaction with singlehood.

Intrapersonal factors

One important question in considering variability among singles in their well-being is the question of who is well suited to singlehood. In this section, we summarize extant research examining the association between well-being outcomes in singlehood and individual characteristics, such as trait levels of attachment security and the extent of desire for a romantic partner (for summary, see Table 2).

Chronic concerns about social relationships. One individual characteristic that is related to well-being outcomes in the context of close relationships is attachment security. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) postulates that as a result of developmental-caregiving histories, individuals develop expectations or working models that guide the approach they take in navigating closeness and intimacy (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Although the degree of contribution of childhood experiences is increasingly in dispute (Fraley & Roisman, 2019), what is clear is that adults show reliable individual differences in attachment security along dimensions of attachment avoidance and anxiety (e.g., Crowell et al., 2016). Individuals higher on the dimension of attachment avoidance tend to value self-reliance, deprioritize close relationships, and at least outwardly display relatively low levels of emotionality. Individuals higher on attachment anxiety experience relatively high levels of negative emotion, tend to crave and feel dependence on close relationships, but have feelings of lower self-worth that lead to hesitation approaching closeness because of fears of rejection. Individuals low on both avoidance and anxiety are considered securely attached and demonstrate comfort in becoming close with others, confidence in their worth to others, and an emotion-management style in which they are comfortable acknowledging and dealing relatively directly with emotion (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Chopik and colleagues (2013, *N* = 86,555) found that, on average, single people reported higher levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance than coupled people across all adult age groups. Likewise, Laming et al. (2021) found that among sexual-minority adults, both higher levels of anxiety and higher levels of avoidance were associated with being more likely to be single long term than in a relationship. Yet these between-group comparisons are not informative regarding the way that individual differences in attachment security are related to the experience of singlehood.

Indeed, although there is a vast literature on the link between attachment security and satisfaction in romantic relationships (for a meta-analysis, see Candel & Turliuc, 2019), only one study has examined links between attachment security and satisfaction with singlehood. MacDonald and Park (2022, *N* = 1,930) found that higher levels of attachment avoidance were associated with lower life satisfaction among single individuals. Attachment avoidance was weakly, negatively

correlated with satisfaction with singlehood, and this relation dropped to nonsignificance when controlling for life satisfaction, suggesting avoidants' dissatisfaction with singlehood is a reflection of a more general lack of contentment rather than focused on singlehood per se. Furthermore, there was a significant negative association between attachment avoidance and desire for a romantic partner, suggesting that singles high in avoidance were less interested in a partner. MacDonald and Park also showed attachment anxiety was associated with lower life satisfaction and lower satisfaction with singlehood. In addition, high levels of attachment anxiety were associated with stronger desire for a romantic partner. Furthermore, age appears to interact with attachment anxiety such that life satisfaction is more strongly, negatively associated with age for singles high versus low in attachment anxiety (Hill Roy et al., 2022). That is, older singles who are highly anxious may be particularly low in life satisfaction. Framing these results in terms of attachment security rather than insecurity, we find that more secure individuals appear to be relatively high in life satisfaction and satisfaction with singlehood and hold moderate interest in entering a romantic relationship.

The data for avoidant individuals suggest that although avoidant individuals are lower than secure individuals in terms of overall life satisfaction, avoidance does not meaningfully predict satisfaction with singlehood and avoidants express relatively little desire for a romantic partner. Indeed, given that avoidants do not expect romantic relationships to bring intimacy (Spielmann, Maxwell, et al., 2013), do not experience relationships as highly satisfying (Candel & Turliuc, 2019), and expect relationships to fail (Birnie et al., 2009), it is not surprising they do not desire partnership. In this sense, avoidants' contentment with singlehood may not stem from enjoyment of singlehood itself so much as the ability to avoid relationship problems by staying single. Indeed, individuals can hold goals to avoid relationship problems for a number of reasons including but not limited to attachment avoidance (e.g., Gable & Impett, 2012). Girme and colleagues (2016) examined whether the association between relationship status and life satisfaction was moderated by such avoidance social goals (i.e., motivated to avoid conflict and disagreements with close others). The results across a college-student sample and a nationally representative sample of more than 4,000 New Zealanders illustrated that single individuals are just as happy with their lives as coupled people when individuals are high in avoidance social goals. Given that higher avoidance is one variable associated with more desire to avoid relationship problems, such as conflict (Feeney & Karantzas, 2017), avoidants' relative contentment with singlehood may reflect the ability to avoid uncomfortable aspects of intimacy. However, given that gravitating toward social independence even in healthy forms, such as solitude, can lead to others pulling away (Ren & Evans, 2021, $N = 1{,}823$), if avoidants are motivated by avoiding difficulties not just in romantic relationships but in relationships generally, the result may be social disconnection for avoidant singles and lower life satisfaction.

The data for highly anxiously attached individuals show clear and consistent patterns of lower life satisfaction, less satisfaction with singlehood, and more desire for a romantic partner. These data suggest that anxiously attached individuals feel relatively unsatisfied with their lives overall and feel unhappy about being single. One reason anxious individuals struggle with singlehood may be a fear of being single. Spielmann, MacDonald, and colleagues (2013) defined the fear of being single as "entailing concern, anxiety, or distress regarding the current or prospective experience of being without a romantic partner" (p. 1049). Anxious attachment, with its associated tendency of needy dependence on close others, is perhaps not surprisingly a strong correlate of fear of being single (although, the Fear of Being Single Scale typically demonstrates effects above and beyond anxious attachment; Spielmann, MacDonald, et al., 2013, total $N = 5{,}005$). Single individuals who hold stronger fears of being single are, on average, less satisfied with being single (Adamczyk et al., 2021, $N = 175$). Indeed, single individuals who more strongly fear being single—despite not self-reporting lower relationship standards—have been shown to express interest in dating profiles lower in physical attractiveness and responsiveness and to be less selective in actual dating contexts (i.e., speed dating; Spielmann et al., 2020, $N = 171$; Spielmann, MacDonald, et al., 2013; also see McClure et al., 2010, $N = 116$). That is, people higher in fear of being single appear to find the prospect of singlehood aversive to the degree that they prefer being in a romantic relationship that is relatively low in satisfaction to remaining single (Spielmann, MacDonald, et al., 2013).

Voluntary versus involuntary singlehood. One dimension that has been theorized to influence satisfaction with singlehood is the extent to which singlehood is voluntary or chosen. Stein (1978) proposed a framework in which the state of being single could be classified as either voluntary or involuntary and either stable or temporary. Relatedly, Apostolou (2017; Apostolou et al., 2020, 2021) examined single individuals' self-reported reasons for being single and consistently found a percentage of singles who indicate that they are single because they enjoy

the freedom and autonomy of their relationship status (seemingly mapping onto more voluntary singlehood) and others who indicate that they are unable to be in a relationship, for example because of low attractiveness (seemingly mapping onto less voluntary singlehood). Additional reasons identified less consistently in this research include singles reporting that they are currently between relationships (e.g., Apostolou et al., 2021) and that difficulties with/negative experiences in past relationships lead to hesitation in approaching relationships (e.g., Apostolou, 2017). Direct research examining whether and how voluntary singlehood is associated with singles' well-being is somewhat scant and has not been entirely consistent. Hostetler (2009) reported that his research among mature, gay men has suggested higher levels of well-being among voluntary singles, whereas Adamczyk's (2017b, $N = 151$) research among primarily heterosexual, Polish, young adults indicated little effect of voluntary singlehood on subjective well-being or mental-health outcomes (other than romantic loneliness).

In a more indirect approach, Kislev (2020b, 2021a) used single individuals' desire for a romantic partner as a proxy variable for voluntary singlehood, equating low levels of desire for a partner with a higher degree of voluntary singlehood. Research on the degree of desire for a partner is valuable but may not fully account for the phenomenon of voluntary singlehood. For example, in Hostetler's (2009) research, the majority of his participants indicated that they were single by choice, but a majority of participants also indicated that they would like to be in a relationship. Although desire for a partner and the sense that singlehood is voluntary are likely negatively correlated, Hostetler's work suggests that one can to some extent feel singlehood is chosen yet simultaneously wish for a romantic partner. For example, individuals might feel like they have chosen to remain single given their current options but that they are open to a relationship if the right person came along. In any event, longitudinal research from the German Family Panel data set has provided evidence that lower levels of desire for a partner are associated with higher life satisfaction (except for divorced men; Kislev, 2021a, $N = 17{,}086$). Park and colleagues' (2021, $N = 1{,}125$) research also using the German Family Panel data set reported that desire for a partner was negatively related to satisfaction with singlehood. Lehmann and colleagues (2015, $N = 841$) similarly found that singles who reported that they often/always would prefer being in a romantic relationship reported lower levels of satisfaction with their relationships status relative to singles who reported never, seldom, or sometimes desiring a partner. Altogether, lower desire for a partner appears to be consistently associated with more positive well-being outcomes for singles.

Age. One variable that has been proposed to moderate the influence of desire for a partner on single individuals' well-being is age (Stein, 1978). In part, this may be because as individuals move into later life, the chances of getting into a romantic relationship decrease (Rapp, 2018, $N = 10{,}272$). Indeed, single women (but not men) with relatively weak desire for a partner beyond midlife have been shown to report higher levels of satisfaction, whereas single who hold strong desire for a partner into later life report lower life satisfaction (Hill Roy et al., 2022, $N = 3{,}057$), perhaps in part because of the frustration of their partnership goal. Of course, a number of individuals may never desire a romantic partner at any point across the life span (DePaulo, 2017; Kislev, 2019). Thus, one pathway associated with well-being in singlehood may be a long-term, stable lack of desire for a partner. For people who do at some point in their life seriously desire a romantic partner, a common experience may be the tension between holding onto and letting go of that desire. On the one hand, holding on to a life longing, such as the desire for a partner, can provide motivation to move toward one's ideal life (Scheibe et al., 2007). When the goal of a relationship is desired and achievable, holding on to such longing may provide a push toward greater well-being. Supporting this perspective, longitudinal research suggests that individuals who transition from being single to being in a relationship, on average, exhibit (at least in the short term) an increase in life satisfaction (Soons et al., 2009, $N = 1{,}775$; Switek & Easterlin, 2016, $N = 1{,}400$) and decreases in loneliness (Buecker et al., 2020, $N = 13{,}945$). On the other hand, the more unachievable the life longing of partnership becomes, the more it can be accompanied by a sense of unhappiness and chronic loss. Thus, people who do hold on to a desire for a romantic partner may find a payoff if they find a romantic relationship but also put themselves at risk of the lowest levels of life satisfaction if they do not.

It would seem reasonable that a number of long-term singles at some point begin letting go of their desire for a partner. Hostetler (2009) identified a distinction between primary control (i.e., shaping the environment to suit one's goals) and secondary control (i.e., adjusting the self to the environment; Rothbaum et al., 1982) as potentially relevant to this aspect of singlehood. That is, beginning to internalize an identity as a single person (Davies, 2003) may, for people who once desired partnership, reflect the process of secondary control around what is perceived as an unchangeable situation (Laurin et al., 2013). Although there are several cultural rituals for letting go of relationships, few such grieving rituals are available for the process of letting go of relationship desire and taking on the identity of a single person (Jackson, 2018). Nevertheless, this sort of identity adjustment may be empowering by leading to a

focus on capitalizing on the opportunities available in single life as opposed to casting oneself as a person who is waiting and at the mercy of some distant and unfound partnership (Lahad, 2012).

Qualitative work suggests that this process of identity adjustment may often be spurred by reaching particular ages or birthdays (Davies, 2003, $N = 30$). Indeed, research has suggested that midlife (broadly defined) may be an important turning point. Singles' life satisfaction and satisfaction with singlehood appear to decline with time in early adulthood (Oh et al., 2022, $N = 3{,}439$). Around ages 30 to 34, singles report the strongest sense that singlehood is not chosen (Bergström & Vivier, 2020, $N = 7{,}825$), and in one study, romantic partnership peaked in importance as the third most important life longing behind physical health and family in the 40 to 59 age group (Scheibe et al., 2007, $N = 299$). However, after midlife, partnership becomes a less important priority (Scheibe et al., 2007); indeed, singles' desire for a partner decreases linearly across adulthood (Park et al., 2022). Longitudinal research has shown that beginning around age 40, singles become more satisfied with singlehood over time (Böger & Huxhold, 2018, $N = 6{,}188$; Park et al., 2022; cf. Hostetler, 2012). Once midlife singles become more comfortable with the idea of life without a partner, they may accelerate the process of investing more in a single life through means such as developing a higher proportion of life goals in domains other than romantic partnership (Wrosch & Heckhausen, 1999, $N = 55$ singles), building their social networks (see below), and getting more skilled at living single (Baumbusch, 2004).

Interpersonal experiences

Although intrapersonal factors have important associations with single people's happiness and well-being, single people's outcomes may also depend on the quality of their interactions with others. In this section, we review studies that highlight how single people's well-being may be associated with the ways in which they perceive and experience the quality of their social relationships with friends, family, and sexual partners (for a summary, see Table 2).

Social support and networks. Relationship scholars have argued that romantic partners serve as important sources of attachment and support during adulthood (e.g., Kammrath et al., 2020), including providing relief from distress and capitalization on positive news (e.g., Feeney & Collins, 2015). This perspective, however, also lends to the assumption that single people are "missing out" on the support of a romantic partner (Adamczyk, 2017a; DePaulo, 2007). Indeed, when considering the relative importance, singles appear to see dating and romance as one of their lowest priorities, whereas top priorities include relationships with family and health (Park & MacDonald, 2022a). Nevertheless, several studies have found that compared with people in romantic relationships, single people tend to feel less supported, report greater loneliness, and perceive that people are less available for support, comfort, and guidance (Adamczyk, 2016, $N = 315$; Greitemeyer, 2009, total $N = 415$; Prezza & Pacilli, 2002, $N = 1{,}040$; Ta et al., 2017, $N = 6{,}955$). Furthermore, a few studies have linked single people's well-being costs and mental-health risks, at least partly, because of their lack of perceived social support (Adamczyk & Segrin, 2015a, 2015b; Girme et al., 2022).

One reason that single people might not feel supported by close others is due to social pressure that is put on singles from family and/or close friends. In fact, Girme and colleagues (2022) found that lower perceptions of social support were associated with greater reported experiences of negative treatment and discrimination, hinting that one possible reason that single people might perceive lower social-support availability is because they experience discrimination directly from people that they may also turn to for support and comfort. For example, calls home to family might involve both a shoulder to cry on and pressure to find a partner. Research on family pressure has been most notably examined in Asian cultures, perhaps because of the conflict that singlehood creates with family and marriage ideals in more highly interdependent contexts. A review of the literature by Himawan and colleagues (2018) highlighted that pressure from family to marry was most common in Asian societies in which singlehood stigma was prevalent (e.g., notable in China but less so in Singapore). Furthermore, family pressure to marry tended to negatively affect single people's well-being and created tension for people to balance single status without upsetting family members (for a thorough review, see Himawan et al., 2018). Recent work on U.S.-based singles also demonstrates that single adults perceive social pressure from parents, family, and friends (particularly for single women) and that this social pressure exacerbated single men and women's fear of being single (Sprecher & Felmlee, 2021, $N = 616$). Of course, social pressure may also involve pressure to engage in certain activities because of their single status. For example, a qualitative study of Norwegian single women ($N = 30$) highlighted how parents tended to pressure single women into spending more time with them because single women were perceived as not having other plans or familial obligations (Heimtun, 2019).

Other perspectives suggest a social cost associated with committed partnerships (see Burton-Chellew & Dunbar, 2015), whereas singlehood allows people the time and freedom to nurture relationships with other

important close others. Several studies including nationally representative U.S. and European data have found that single people tend to report better social-support functioning compared with coupled people, including stronger friendship and sibling attachment (Brumbaugh, 2017; Doherty & Feeney, 2004) and larger and better quality of social interactions and tangible help with friends and family (Gillespie et al., 2015; Kalmijn, 2003; Kislev, 2020c; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2016). Friendships, in particular, may play an important role in fostering single people's well-being. Friendship support has been shown to be associated with lower feelings of loneliness in unpartnered older adults (Dykstra, 1995, N = 131). More recently, Park and colleagues (2021, N = 3,890) illustrated that single adults who were more satisfied with the quality of their friendships reported greater life satisfaction and satisfaction with singlehood (but not lower desire for a romantic partner; see also Hostetler, 2012, N = 94). Likewise, a latent profile analysis of 4,835 single adults found that half of the profiles extracted included singles that had high-quality relationships with their friends and family, and these profiles reported the highest levels of life satisfaction and lowest levels of loneliness and depressive symptoms (compared with singles with worse-quality relationships with friends/family; Walsh et al., 2022).

Not only do these studies highlight that high-quality friendships may be important for fostering single people's well-being but also that single people seem to be motivated to cultivate and maintain friendship relationships (although, for evidence that singles prioritize family more highly than friends, see Park & MacDonald, 2022a). Fisher and colleagues (2021, N = 279) found that single young adults report being more invested in their friendships than coupled adults. Furthermore, young adults who invested in their friendships were more likely to report greater friendship quality and self-esteem across a 2-year period, especially for individuals who were single (Fisher et al., 2021; also see Kislev, 2020c). Friendships might also be particularly important for single people who are not strongly motivated to find a romantic partner; one study examining Pairfam data found that singles who did not desire a relationship tended to place more importance on friendship relationships (Kislev, 2020b, N = 1,338) and that this effect operated bidirectionally; single people who placed more importance on friendships were also less likely to want a relationship the following year (Kislev, 2020b). Taken together, these findings suggest that single people who cultivate strong social-support networks via family and friendship relationships are likely to be among the singles higher in well-being.

Sexual satisfaction. Perhaps one of the most obvious potential social benefits that accompanies being involved in a romantic relationship is partnered sexual activity. Not all singles are interested in sex (e.g., people who identify as asexual; Vares, 2022), but a significant portion of singles are sexually active and/or seeking sexual opportunities (Gray et al., 2019). Although married individuals report believing that single people are having more sex than are married people (Gesselman et al., 2019, N = 6,576), the data suggest the opposite: People in committed romantic relationships have sex more frequently and are more sexually satisfied than single individuals (Antičević et al., 2017, N = 632; Kislev, 2020a, N = 3,500; Park & MacDonald, 2022b, N = 1,238). In fact, mean levels of sexual satisfaction for singles as measured by the Satisfaction With Sex Life Scale Revised (Park & MacDonald, 2022b) fell below the midpoint of the scale, which is labeled "moderately satisfied." Stein (1975) suggested a tension here such that the possibility of sexual exploration is a pull toward singlehood, whereas the experience of sexual frustration can be a push away from singlehood.

Variability in singles' sexual satisfaction would be expected to be associated with well-being given the robust association between sexual satisfaction and well-being both generally (Davison et al., 2009) and among people in romantic partnerships (Holmberg et al., 2010). Indeed, Park and colleagues (2021, N = 3,890) found that higher levels of sexual satisfaction were associated with higher life satisfaction for singles (a link that was not moderated by gender; see also Kislev, 2020a). Furthermore, even when researchers controlled for life satisfaction, more sexually satisfied singles report higher levels of satisfaction with singlehood, less desire to get married, and less desire for a romantic partner (Gray et al., 2019, N = 1,522; Kislev, 2021b, N = 8,533; Park et al., 2021; Park & MacDonald, 2022b). However, despite sexually satisfied singles reporting less desire for a partner, longitudinal evidence suggests they are more likely to end up in a committed romantic relationship (Park et al., 2021). The link between sexual satisfaction and being drawn into a committed relationship may be an example of the relationship-progression bias or the tendency for romantic and sexual connections to move in the direction of more rather than less investment and commitment (Joel & MacDonald, 2021). In this case, the progression bias may manifest as individuals who start off as sexual partners only but who are pulled in the direction of becoming committed romantic partners.

Also of interest is that the effects of sexual satisfaction among singles do not seem to be attributable to sexual frequency alone (Muise et al., 2016; Park et al., 2021). That is, there is an important subjective component to sexual well-being among singles in addition to sexual frequency. One aspect of such subjectivity appears to be the match between the sexual experiences one is (or is not) having and the sexual experiences that are

desired. For example, Gray et al. (2019) showed that higher ideal sexual frequency was associated with lower sexual satisfaction, whereas actual sexual frequency was associated with higher sexual satisfaction, suggesting divergent effects of wanting and having more sex on singles' sexual satisfaction. Furthermore, Park and MacDonald (2022b) found an interactive effect in the domain of partnered (but not solitary) sexual activity such that low levels of sexual satisfaction were reported by singles who desired relatively high levels of partnered sexual activity but who were not frequently having partnered sex. Overall, subjective evaluations of desired sexual activity appear to be a key aspect of sexual satisfaction (for both singles and partnered individuals; Park & MacDonald, 2022b). Similar to the conclusions from research on desire for a partner in general, there appear to be two paths to relatively high levels of sexual satisfaction for singles: having low desire for partnered sex or combining high desire with relatively high frequency of partnered sex.

Societal influences

Societal and cultural contexts often elevate the value of romantic relationships, marriage, and family ideals. Despite the evolution many traditional ideals around relationships have been undergoing, single people are arguably caught in a "cultural lag" whereby positive and inclusive beliefs about singlehood are yet to catch up to mainstream ideology (Byrne & Carr, 2005). In this section, we describe the downstream effects of societal and cultural beliefs that place romantic relationships on a pedestal at the expense of single living (for a summary, see Table 2).

Societal and cultural beliefs about relationships versus singlehood. A pervasive belief that exists in many societies is that everyone desires to be in a (heterosexual, monogamous) romantic partnership and that romantic relationships provide unique benefits to people in the form of happiness, well-being, and meaning (Day, 2016; DePaulo & Morris, 2005). Several perspectives are available to examine why these relationship beliefs exist. One social-psychological perspective suggests that the need to belong is a fundamental psychological need and that commitment to marriage and family provides people with feelings of security that they are loved and cared for regardless of whether that is true (Kaiser & Kashy, 2005). Sociological perspectives argue that the institution of heterosexual marriage and family was functional for sociopolitical reasons and is difficult to change given that it operates as an institution for the privileged such that married individuals typically have access to financial and economic resources and security compared with the unmarried (Byrne & Carr, 2005; Finkel et al., 2014). Consistent with this argument, threats to sociopolitical systems lead men (but not women) to endorse relationship commitment ideology (Day et al., 2011, $N = 365$). The defensive endorsement of relationship-commitment beliefs is also most prevalent in cultures in which there is more gender equality, in which men may feel threatened by women's socioeconomic power and thus be more likely to adopt marriage and family ideals (Day et al., 2011 cross-cultural data $N = 33{,}018$). Note that in their final two studies (Ns = 95 and 65), Day and colleagues (2011) found that both men and women endorsed relationship-commitment ideology when experiencing personal threats to their identity, suggesting that these beliefs are important at the institutional level (perhaps more so for men, who benefit from patriarchal hierarchies) and the interpersonal level (for both men and women).

This "Ideology of Marriage and Family" (DePaulo & Morris, 2005), or relationship-commitment ideology (Day, 2016; Day et al., 2011), is also underscored by the belief that single people are unable to attain similar benefits. Thus, similar to how threats to the status quo trigger defensive endorsement of relationship-commitment ideology, so too may singlehood. Arguably, singlehood that is chosen as a lifestyle or singlehood beyond normative marriageable age may be seen as threatening relationship ideals (Kaiser & Kashy, 2005). As with many other psychological threats, people tend to resolve these conflicts by undermining singlehood as a life choice, pressuring (or coercing) singles to marry, and/or creating narratives that there may be something inherently "wrong" with people who are single to explain why they are not coupled (Kaiser & Kashy, 2005). When threatened by a single person who is thriving and happy, people may even subtype that individual as a rare instance of singlehood leading to positive outcomes rather than examine their beliefs about relationships as the key source of happiness and well-being (Kaiser & Kashy, 2005).

In contrast to marriage and family ideology, postmaterialist values may support single living and enhance single people's well-being. Family and marriage ideals may have helped to foster security and support during unstable economic and political contexts (see Kislev, 2018). However, the rise of relative economic and political stability in more recent history may have led some individuals and cultures to abandon family values in the pursuit of individualism and self-expression (see Kislev, 2018). If this is true, then the rise in postmaterialist values may not only explain the rising numbers of people who are single later in adulthood or choosing solo living but also provide an avenue for single people

to thrive by supporting single people's lifestyles. Kislev (2018) tested this hypothesis using a large data set from the European Social Survey (*N*s range = 207,961–208,412). Single adults over the age of 30 who endorsed higher levels of postmaterialist values, such as fun-seeking, value of freedom, creativity, and trying new things, were more likely to report greater happiness compared with single adults who endorsed lower levels of these values. These results were true for various single statuses, including never married, separated/divorced, and widowed, but were not observed in married or cohabiting individuals (Kislev, 2018).

Of course, the extent to which people endorse specific values about committed relationships/marriage versus singlehood and the impact this has on single people's outcomes may also depend on broader cultural contexts. Indeed, the extent to which people endorse postmaterialist values versus marriage ideology may also differ according to country-level ideals about communal versus individualistic values. Highlighting that the role of family values vary across cultural contexts, MacDonald and colleagues (MacDonald et al., 2012; MacDonald & Jessica, 2006) demonstrated that having family approval and family support for one's relationship was particularly important for people living in more interdependent countries (e.g., Indonesia, Japan) compared with individualistic countries (e.g., Australia, Canada). Furthermore, specific countries, regions, or religions may hold unique beliefs or values that shape single people's narratives about relationships and singlehood; for example, the concept of "jodoh" (soulmate as fated by God at the perfect timing), which can be part of never-married Muslim Mayal women's narratives about why they are single (Ibrahim & Hassan, 2009). Taken together, the endorsement of societal beliefs may hold important implications for single people's well-being outcomes, and understanding how these narratives have a direct impact on single people's livelihoods (especially across different cultural contexts) is an important direction for future work.

Social stigma and discrimination. Evidence is increasing that discrimination against individuals who are single is also an important force in single people's lives. DePaulo and colleagues have written extensively about the institutionalized discrimination against single individuals—or singlism—including housing or rental discrimination, health-system barriers that require the presence and support of a significant other, and the lack of tax, health, and discount benefits afforded to couples and families but not singles (DePaulo, 2007; DePaulo & Morris, 2005, 2006; Morris et al., 2008). The only empirical evidence of this institutional bias favoring marriage comes from a series of four experiments in which rental agents and undergraduate students rated hypothetical rental applications (Morris et al., 2007, total $N = 342$). Discrimination and unfair treatment of single people also occurs at the interpersonal level. Experimental work has demonstrated that compared with coupled individuals, single individuals are perceived by others as worse roommates in terms of cleanliness and reliability (Morris et al., 2007, total $N = 342$); less friendly, warm, and trustworthy; more lonely and miserable (Hertel et al., 2007, $N = 267$); and more likely to be at risk of sexually-transmitted disease (Conley & Collins, 2002, total $N = 549$). In an attempt to test whether there is any basis for these stereotypes, Greitemeyer (2009, total $N = 416$) had single and coupled people rate themselves and a single versus coupled target on various personality and well-being measures. People (including other singles) perceived singles as being lower in extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, sociability, physical attractiveness, self-esteem, and life satisfaction and higher in neuroticism and openness to experience. Singles were also perceived as being less satisfied with and wanting to change their relationship status relative to people in romantic relationships. In reality, although single participants actually did report being less happy with and wanting to change their relationship status, singles and coupled people did not differ on any of the other personality and well-being measures (Greitemeyer, 2009). In fact, people readily believe that these assumptions about single people are justified (Fisher & Sakaluk, 2020, Study 2, $N = 153$; also see Morris et al., 2007), despite contrary evidence.

Perhaps not surprisingly, these stereotypes about singles are also felt by single individuals in the way of negative treatment and discriminatory experiences. For example, Byrne and Carr (2005) reported data from the Midlife Development in the United States survey, a random sample survey of more than 3,000 men and women ages 25 to 74 in 1995. They found that never-married individuals reported greater instances of interpersonal discrimination compared with married individuals (e.g., being treated with less courtesy/respect, receiving poorer service in restaurants, being called names or insulted). Extending this work, single individuals also report experiencing negative treatment and discrimination attributed to their singlehood status (Fisher & Sakaluk, 2020, Study 1, $N = 297$; Girme et al., 2022, Study 1, $N = 4{,}024$, Study 2, *N*s = 806–889). Consistent with the broader discrimination literature, experiences of negative treatment and discrimination have been shown to undermine single adults' well-being. Girme and colleagues (2022) found that single individuals reported lower well-being compared with coupled people and that this association was partly mediated by single adults' reports of greater instances of discrimination in general (e.g., people insisting they know what is best

for them, people happily interacting with them in formal situations but not social ones) and in day-to-day interactions (e.g., feeling harassed, pitied, treated unfairly, out of place, patronized). Taken together, these findings move away from deficit-based narratives that singles are unhappy because of personal deficiencies and instead highlight that singles might experience worse well-being because of institutionalized and interpersonal forms of discrimination.

Societal norms about gender. One important issue that becomes apparent when considering singlehood regards distinct experiences or outcomes that may relate to gender. When looking broadly at whether being in a relationship confers different psychological and physical-health benefits to men versus women, there does not appear to be consistent evidence to support an effect in either direction. For example, although some studies found that being in a (marital) relationship is associated with men's life satisfaction and physical-health benefits more strongly than women's (e.g., Stronge et al., 2019; meta-analysis by Wang et al., 2020), other studies suggest that the life-satisfaction advantage of marriage is greater for women than men (e.g., Grover & Helliwell, 2019; Tao, 2019). Furthermore, there are also studies that found no significant gender differences (e.g., Kalmijn, 2017; meta-analysis by Luhmann et al., 2012).

One way to understand this inconsistency is to consider the possibility that gender may be less tied to degree of overall well-being and more strongly tied to domain-specific gendered experiences that enhance or undermine well-being. One domain that has shown some consistent evidence for the idea that being single has greater costs for men is social support. Because men tend to have smaller social networks than women (Igarashi et al., 2005; McLaughlin et al., 2010) and tend to rely more on a romantic partner for support (Gurung et al., 2003; Liao et al., 2018), being single may be associated with greater deficits in supportive experiences for men. Consistent with this idea, being single or unmarried has been more strongly associated with lower levels of perceived social support (Stronge et al., 2019), poorer social well-being (Shapiro & Keyes, 2008), and greater loneliness (Nicolaisen & Thorsen, 2014) among men than women. Single men also tend to report less satisfaction with social support than single women (McLaughlin et al., 2010).

Another widely researched difference between men and women's singlehood experiences stems from the perspective that single women (vs. men) may be subject to greater experiences of marginalization. For example, Lahad (2017) and Budgeon (2016) argued that long-term singlehood deviates from society's expectations for people to enter committed partnerships, especially for women who pass the normative age for marriage and childbearing. Thus, single women may often be portrayed negatively, as either lacking in communal qualities (e.g., having failed to maintain relationships) or having unmitigated agentic qualities (e.g., being too focused on career). Supporting this theoretical perspective, narratives in several qualitative studies focused on single (or unmarried) women suggest that single women feel that they face the need to explain why they are single and experience stigmatization that their single status is due to some sort of personal deficit (e.g., Gui, 2020; Moore & Radtke, 2015; Sandfield & Percy, 2003; Sharp & Ganong, 2011; R. Simpson, 2016; average N = 25). However, quantitative studies suggest that gender identity may be related to the types of stereotypes attached to single status rather than the absolute valence or intensity of stereotypes. For example, single men seem to be just as likely as single women to be subject to evaluations that are more negative than what their partnered counterparts receive (e.g., lonely, unattractive; Conley & Collins, 2002; Greitemeyer, 2009). However, people also ascribe different stereotypes to single men (e.g., irresponsible) and women (e.g., fragile/pure; Sakallı Uğurlu et al., 2021, N = 206; also see Byrne & Carr, 2005). Thus, although both single men and women deal with discrimination for violating relationship norms, they may experience discrimination in different domains.

Societal norms about parenthood. In societies that place value and expectations on parenthood (particularly in two-parent families), having or not having a child can both have important implications for singles' well-being. Singles without a child may experience a double stigma from being single and childless (or not wanting a child) to the extent that their single status signals having less intention to have a child. Stigma experienced by childless women in particular has received considerable research attention (e.g., Hird & Abshoff, 2000; Riessman, 2000). For example, Turnbull and colleagues (2016, N = 776) reported that more than 40% of childless women have perceived at least a slight degree of exclusion from social interaction and social support because of their childless status. Voluntarily childless women in particular tend to elicit the most contempt and disgust but also greatest envy and are perceived to be the most competent and highest in status compared with mothers and involuntarily childless women (Bays, 2017, N = 297). Note that voluntarily childless men tend to elicit a similar degree of moral outrage from others as their women counterparts (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017, N = 197), and both childless men and women receive more negative stereotypical evaluations compared with fathers and mothers (Ciaccio et al., 2021, N = 572).

On the other hand, for singles who do have a child, solo parenting can have its own unique implications for well-being. Given that the majority of single-parent families are headed by single mothers (e.g., approximately 80% in most OECD countries; OECD, 2016), much research has been conducted on single mothers' well-being (for a review, see Nelson et al., 2014). Parenting without a partner can be highly stressful and heighten the single mother's financial, emotional, or caregiving burden (Meier et al., 2016, $N = 5{,}683$). Note that comparing single versus partnered parents arguably confounds the effects of partnership status and parental status and thus cannot precisely speak to diverse parenting experiences *within* singles. Indeed, in Pollmann-Schult's (2018, $N = 56{,}431$) study, single mothers were less satisfied with their lives compared with childless singles in 13 out of 24 European countries, equally satisfied in 10 countries, and more satisfied in one country, suggesting that other societal or contextual factors may be at play for understanding the challenges of single parenting. In fact, the psychological and economic disadvantage of single mothers is reduced when societies support family policies, including longer parental leave, higher proportion of paid leave and greater monthly family allowances, or public child care (Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis, 2015, $N = 519{,}825$; Pollmann-Schult, 2018; for data on collectivist norms and single parenthood, also see Stavrova & Fetchenhauer, 2015). In sum, although singles (especially women) with children may be at risk for lower well-being compared with partnered parents, research also speaks to the potential that this well-being gap may be reduced with supportive policies and norms.

Although considerably more attention has been paid to single parenting following divorce or separation, intentionally single mothers are becoming increasingly common (Imrie & Golombok, 2020; although, for emerging work on single fathers, see Carone et al., 2020). Indeed, given that one contributor to people's negative feelings about being single is the barrier it creates to having children with a partner (Spielmann, MacDonald, et al., 2013), the ability to parent without a partner (e.g., medically assisted reproduction or adoption) may have implications for single people's outlook on singlehood and broader well-being. In particular, it may be an attractive option for singles whose desire primarily lies in becoming a parent rather than having a partner (e.g., Jadva et al., 2015, $N = 291$), although we certainly do not ignore the financial barriers (i.e., single parents by choice tend to be well educated with a full-time job; Jadva et al., 2009) and societal barriers (i.e., some countries prohibit single men access to adoption or surrogacy; Carone et al., 2020) that may restrict single people's autonomy in pursuing parenthood. Nonetheless, the emerging research on solo parenting by choice tentatively suggests that there are no strong differences in social support and well-being between single parents by choice and coupled parents (Chasson & Taubman – Ben-Ari, 2021, $N = 174$; Golombok et al., 2016, $N = 103$; Segal-Engelchin & Wozner, 2005, $N = 174$). When differences have been found, they show that single mothers by choice reported higher personal growth compared with coupled mothers but perceived less support from a close significant other (Chasson & Taubman – Ben-Ari, 2021). In sum, singles who enter into parenthood may fare just as well as partnered parents (and their children experience comparable outcomes as well; see Golombok, 2017).

Theoretical Considerations: Where to From Here?

Research on singlehood has predominantly focused on between-group comparisons between single and coupled people. In this review, we adopted a within-group perspective to attain more fidelity on which single people are higher versus lower in well-being (see Table 1). By adopting a within-group perspective toward singlehood experiences, we were able to identify intrapersonal, interpersonal, and societal factors related to when single people are thriving and when single people may struggle with their singlehood status (see Table 2). Contrary to long-standing deficit-based narratives about single people, our within-group perspective demonstrates that a profile of the happy single person is emerging. This profile appears to include single people who are secure; do not desire a partner; foster functional relationships with friends, family, and sexual partners (when desired); and live in societies that value nontraditional norms around marriage. Single people with these features tend to report more positive well-being outcomes, including lower rates of mental-health problems and greater satisfaction with life and their single status. However, this relatively small body of research leaves most questions about singlehood unaddressed or answered unsatisfactorily. Furthermore, the studies on singlehood reviewed here are limited in their generalizability; most studies were restricted to WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) samples (predominantly U.S., Canadian, and European samples) that reflect strong heteronormative narratives about family and marriage (Henrich et al., 2010). Thus, in this final section, we discuss what we believe to be important theoretical considerations for scholars wishing to adopt a more within-group focus in studying singlehood.

To be clear, we are not suggesting that scholars adopt *only* a within-group perspective but, rather, that

a within-group perspective offers much needed balance to existing approaches to understanding singlehood. Rather than a "marriage versus singlehood" debate, we argue that singlehood and relationship processes ought to be viewed as potentially mutually informative. For example, the desire to leave a relationship has arguably been treated as a negative outcome, whereas the desire to leave singlehood has arguably been treated as a positive outcome. Our perspective highlights that romantic-relationship researchers might want to consider when low or even moderate relationship satisfaction might indicate not that there is a relationship that needs to be "fixed" but that there is a healthy desire for a life outside of that relationship or possibly any relationship. Conversely, understanding the circumstances related to being a happy and stable single person may shed light on if and when the desire to start a romantic relationship is grounded in more or less healthy motives that are likely, or unlikely, to start a relationship out on the right foot. Overall, adopting a within-group perspective on singlehood may be helpful in facilitating integrated theories across singlehood and relationship science.

In contemplating what theoretical perspectives to apply to studying singlehood from a within-group perspective, two central considerations strike us as important. First, singlehood research is fairly young, especially in psychology. Thus, although social psychology is a field that strongly values theoretical approaches, it is important to make sure that descriptive work in this budding area is appropriately valued as a necessary building block of theory construction and application. Second, singlehood is a broad phenomenon, not an individual psychological process, and thus a variety of theoretical perspectives are relevant and needed to facilitate understanding. Indeed, there is not one theory of romantic relationships but several, each addressing specific empirical questions about relationship processes and stability. Thus, rather than prematurely building a theoretical model for singlehood, here we use a within-group perspective to bring attention to important aspects of single people's lives and suggest theoretical perspectives that might be productive in building a psychology of singlehood. As illustrated in Table 3, we first (a) identify aspects of singlehood identified by our review as important themes and (b) highlight existing areas of research in each theme that has been conducted. By summarizing the extant work on singlehood in this way, we can (c) suggest areas of research that are lacking and have not been addressed by existing research. Finally, building on well-established theoretical perspectives, we (d) offer suggestions for theories and models that may provide helpful frameworks for moving forward with research on that specific aspect of singlehood. Our suggestions are not meant to be exhaustive, but an attempt to provide theoretical guidance about how key aspects of singlehood can be examined using existing theoretical frameworks moving forward. Keeping space constraints in mind, we provide a few example reflections from Table 3 in detail below.

Well-being in broader context

Our review has centered around singles' well-being, particularly satisfaction with singlehood, but has not focused on why satisfaction with singlehood may be important for understanding singles' outcomes more broadly. One perspective that might be useful here, borrowed from the relationship literature, is the investment model of commitment (Rusbult et al., 1998). Although the investment model has been applied to commitment in romantic relationships, it is broadly applicable to commitment to any goal or course of action. According to the investment model, a strong predictor of persistence toward a goal (e.g., staying in a romantic relationship) is commitment. Individuals who are higher in commitment to a goal are argued to experience a transformation of motivation such that they behave in ways that facilitate success in that goal pursuit (e.g., more committed romantic partners pay less attention to attractive others; Miller, 1997). According to the investment model, three key predictors of being more committed are satisfaction (or anticipated future satisfaction, Baker et al., 2017; Lemay, 2016), the quality of alternatives, and investment (see Le & Agnew, 2003). In our review, we covered research exploring the predictors of satisfaction with singlehood and discussed single individuals' perceptions of the alternative (being in a romantic relationship). Single individuals who are happier with singlehood (e.g., older singles; Böger & Huxhold, 2020) and who perceive alternatives to singlehood less positively or as less available (e.g., people with low desire for a partner or who feel unable to attract a partner; Apostolou et al., 2021; Kislev, 2020b) should be more committed to singlehood and thus more likely to persist as single. However, our review has not identified research pointing to the investments one may make in a single life, such as buying a one-bedroom condo or accepting work in a remote location with little in the way of romantic options. Thus, future research may want to examine all three elements of the investment model of commitment as a means of understanding who is most likely to persist with singlehood over the long term.

Furthermore, there are likely many other theoretically relevant outcomes beyond satisfaction with life and singlehood that can reveal unique aspects about singlehood. For example, broaden-and-build theory

Table 3. Identifying Important Aspects of Singlehood and Theoretical Frameworks That May Provide Scaffolding for Future Research on the Psychology of Singlehood

Aspects of singlehood	Areas with existing research	Areas without existing research	Potentially applicable theoretical frameworks
Well-being[a]	• Life satisfaction (domain general) • Satisfaction with singlehood (domain specific)	• Commitment to singlehood (short term vs. long term) • Physical health • Purpose/richness in life • Personal growth	• Investment model of commitment (Baker et al., 2017; Lemay, 2016; Rusbult et al., 1998) • The broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001)
Interpersonal security	• Attachment security • Approach and avoidance social goals • Fear of being single	• Self-esteem • Buffering insecurities in singlehood	• Attachment theory (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016) • Sociometer theory (Leary & Baumeister, 2000) • Vulnerability-stress-adaptation model (Karney & Bradbury, 1995) • Dyadic-regulation model of insecurity buffering (Overall & Simpson, 2015; J. A. Simpson & Overall, 2014)
Feeling singlehood is chosen[a]	• Voluntary vs. involuntary singlehood • Desire for a romantic partner • Meeting autonomy needs • Meeting belongingness needs	• Feeling competent at living single	• Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) • Constraint commitment (Stanley & Markman, 1992)
Sexual satisfaction	• Sexual desire • Sexual satisfaction • Sexual frequency	• Asexuality • Same-sex sexuality • Varieties of casual sexual relationships • Commercial sex	• Sexual hyperactivation and deactivation (Birnbaum et al., 2014) • Multiple-discrepancies theory (Michalos, 1985)
Social support	• Family relationships • Friendships • Social networks	• Communities of singles (e.g., online) • Religion and religious communities	• Attachment theory (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016) • Thriving through relationships (Feeney & Collins, 2015)
Stigma and discrimination[a]	• Institutionalized discrimination • Interpersonal discrimination • Social pressure to couple • Identification with singlehood	• Resilience in the face of stigma • Threats to singlehood identity • Internalized singlehood stigma	• Stereotype-content model & the BIAS map (Cuddy et al., 2008) • Social-identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986)
Intersectional identities[a]	• Age: satisfaction with singlehood across the adult life span/age cohorts • Gender: unique stereotypes about single men vs. women • Parenthood: challenges with being childless or solo parenting (particularly for women)	• Adolescents • Single fathers • Race • Culture • Socioeconomic status • Sexual- and gender-diverse identities • Ability/disability	• Life-span theory of control (Heckhausen & Schulz, 1995; also see Hostetler, 2009) • Intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1991) • Social-role theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012)

Note: BIAS = Behavior from Intergroup Affect and Stereotypes.
[a]This theme is discussed in the text as a more detailed example of future directions revealed by this review.

(Fredrickson, 2001) offers one theoretical framework that focuses on how positive emotions and psychological experiences can foster increasingly more positive experiences in an upward spiral. Although the lack of positive outcomes assessed in singlehood studies may in itself reveal that scholars are not immune to societal biases about singlehood, assessing both negative and positive outcomes simultaneously is important because

these outcomes may or may not be mutually exclusive and may help identify not only when singles are thriving but also in what domains. One such example is a study conducted by Hsu and Barrett (2020, $N = 1{,}711$), who examined both negative (e.g., depressive symptoms) and positive (e.g., autonomy, personal growth, purpose in life) well-being indicators. Hsu and Barrett found that never-married, formerly married, or remarried individuals did not differ in negative well-being indicators but did differ on positive well-being indicators. Specifically, never-married singles reported the lowest levels of self-acceptance, purpose in life, and social relations but the highest levels of autonomy compared with formerly married or remarried individuals (Hsu & Barrett, 2020). Thus, singlehood researchers should consider moving beyond broad indicators of well-being (e.g., life and singlehood satisfaction) and consider how existing theoretical frameworks identify other important well-being indicators that may play a unique role in the experience of being single (e.g., positive emotions, personal growth, meaning, and richness of life; Oishi & Westgate, 2022).

Feeling singlehood is chosen

Another central theme that comes through much work on singlehood is consideration of whether singlehood is felt to be voluntary or chosen as opposed to involuntary or imposed. One framework that can be useful for understanding the extent to which activities feel personally endorsed is self-determination theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000). According to SDT, there is variation in the extent to which individuals feel their activities are freely chosen or coerced, expressed in SDT terms as ranging from intrinsic motivation (a goal is fully endorsed by the self) to extrinsic motivation (a goal is imposed by external forces) to amotivation (there is no motivation toward that goal). Thus, singlehood studies may benefit from adopting an SDT framework to understand the extent to which individuals feel singlehood is something they want versus something that is imposed on them. Relatedly, singlehood research has also pointed to the fact that not only can individuals desire singlehood for a variety of reasons but also that single people may desire not to be single (i.e., desire to be in a romantic relationship) for a variety of reasons. This might include innate desires for connection (intrinsic motivation) but can also include family or societal pressure (extrinsic motivation). Indeed, there may be no motivation to be in a romantic relationship whatsoever (amotivation). Thus, SDT may be useful for understanding both the extent to which singlehood is chosen and the extent to which single people feel either choice or coercion in their approach to dating and relationships. Furthermore, the SDT perspective suggests that people who feel most strongly that singlehood is intrinsically motivated or voluntary will be people who can feel that they are autonomous, connected, and competent in pursuing a single life. Although our review has identified issues around autonomy and connection, the singlehood literature does not currently provide much insight into who is good at being single (i.e., competent). For example, it seems reasonable that more conscientious people would be better able to manage life's multiple demands on their own and thus may, on average, feel both more competent at singlehood and more like singlehood is chosen.

Related to our earlier discussion of commitment, Stanley and Markman's (1992) distinction between personal dedication (a personal desire to maintain or improve one's existing relationship status) and constraint commitment (maintaining relationship status as a result of constraining forces) may also be useful in better understanding voluntary versus involuntary singlehood. That is, individuals who feel their singlehood is voluntary may have an experience of singlehood that is analogous to that of individuals who are in relationships because of personal dedication (e.g., singles who enjoy solitude and are committed to a life that supports that), whereas individuals who feel their singlehood is involuntary may look more like people in relationships because of constraint commitment (e.g., singles whose time is monopolized by caregiving for sick relatives and who avoid dating to maintain that focus). For example, Burke and Segrin (2014) provided evidence that individuals in romantic relationships who were higher in personal dedication to the relationship reported lower levels of loneliness, whereas people higher in constraint commitment reported higher levels of loneliness, an outcome that may be likely to accompany voluntary and involuntary singlehood, respectively. Thus, drawing on the measures and findings in the personal dedication/constraint commitment literature may be useful for developing predictions regarding voluntary/involuntary singlehood.

Stigma and discrimination

Another aspect of singlehood that our review indicates strong support for is that many singlehood experiences are touched by stigma. For example, "singlism" at the institutional level means that financial benefits are available to married but not single individuals (DePaulo & Morris, 2005), and at the interpersonal level, it means that singles face discrimination because of single status (Fisher & Sakaluk, 2020; Girme et al., 2022). Although these findings are important for identifying sources of single people's unhappiness (Girme et al., 2022), there

is still much more to unpack about singlehood stigma. For example, the stereotype-content model (Cuddy et al., 2008) can provide insight about the content of stereotypes regarding singlehood. According to the stereotype-content model, social groups tend to be stereotyped along two dimensions: warmth (based on perceptions of trustworthiness) and competence (based on perceptions of power). Furthermore, how a group is perceived can determine subsequent emotional responses (whether the group is pitied, admired, envied, or met with disgust) and behavioral responses (active and passive harm or facilitation). Existing research highlights that singles are seen as less warm/friendly and more lonely/miserable compared with coupled people (e.g., Hertel et al., 2007) and may experience both active and passive forms of discrimination (e.g., Girme et al., 2022). Applying the stereotype-content model could provide a deeper understanding of how single people and certain subgroups of singles may be viewed and treated because of certain characteristics. For example, voluntary singles who directly violate relationship norms may be seen as more competent and agentic but less warm. In contrast, involuntary singles may be seen as more warm but less competent. Indeed, given how diverse singlehood is, variations in stereotype content are likely to exist for people who violate societal or gendered norms in other ways, too, such as single men versus women, single parents, and sexual- and gender-diverse singles. These varying stereotypes may provide clarity about which single people are likely to experience passive forms of harm, such as pity, versus active forms of harm, such as social exclusion. By identifying the specific content of stereotypes of various types of singles, this theoretical framework also has the potential to isolate the types of attributes that should be targeted for interventions to foster more accepting and inclusive societal attitudes toward single people.

Furthermore, given that singlism likely stems from societal beliefs and norms that prioritize marriage/long-term coupling and family, as with other such social stigmas, there are likely to be individual differences in the extent to which single individuals internalize these negative beliefs about singlehood. Yet apart from one study that showed that even single participants perceived single hypothetical characters negatively (Hertel et al., 2007), no research has directly examined the ways in which single individuals may internalize versus resist internalization of singlehood stigma. Social-identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) may be particularly useful in understanding how singles identify with singlehood. Social-identity theory purports that people have a strong motivation to center their identity around group membership (e.g., race, nationality, religion). Furthermore, these social identities guide people's attitudes and behaviors related to in-group and out-group members. For example, people who identify strongly with a group (e.g., people with identities strongly grounded in singlehood) see themselves as having similar characteristics to the group and are likely to see their group as an important source of belonging. Indeed, it seems plausible that a strong singlehood identity may provide a sense of community with other singles and act as a buffer against discrimination that single people face (see Shih, 2004). Research in this vein may want to attend to the growing number of singlehood support groups, particularly in online spaces. Of course, to the extent that singles assimilate to the dominant societal norms about relationships and/or internalize negative stereotypes about singlehood, singlehood identity may also be a source of internal conflict. In this sense, social-identity theory may help explain why some single people attempt to distance themselves from their singlehood identity and why, on average, single individuals do not have identities strongly grounded in singlehood (Fisher & Sakaluk, 2020, *N*s = 297 and 153). Given that, at least for the time being, singlehood is not a strong identity piece for most singles, the issue of intersecting identities might be particularly important in the case of singlehood because other elements of identity besides singlehood might dominate singles' experiences more strongly.

Intersectional identities

These considerations point to the multitude of identities that intersect with singlehood and shape the experience of being single for a variety of individuals (Kaiser & Kashy, 2005). Indeed, with a few exceptions, the research on singlehood has thus far been largely silent on issues of race (cf. Himawan et al., 2018; Pudrovska et al., 2006), sexual orientation (cf. Laming et al., 2021), culture (cf. Dales, 2014), socioeconomic status (cf. Byrne & Carr, 2005), transgender and nonbinary individuals, and ability/disability status. In line with the reality that there are multiple experiences of singlehood, all of these factors—alone and in combination—are important directions for a field of singlehood research that wishes to document the heterogeneity of the experience. One theoretical framework that can contribute to understanding the multifaceted identities that intersect with singlehood is intersectionality theory (e.g., Crenshaw, 1991), which points to the degrees of power afforded to various social groups and the ways in which the power associated with these identities, alone and in combination, affect individuals' experience of various social phenomena. For example, Laming and colleagues (2021) found that although single sexual minorities reported more internalization of antigay

stigma and more concern about negative repercussions of being a sexual minority than people in relationships, sexual-minority singles reported less discrimination than people in relationships. That is, one aspect of being single more unique to sexual minorities may be that one's sexuality may be less publicly visible than people with romantic partners, which may in turn reduce instances of discrimination. Indeed, the ways in which singlehood may serve not as a source of struggle but as a marker of the rejection of heteronormative expectations among sexual-minority communities may be an important intersectional focus moving forward. More broadly, these examples highlight the importance of a focus on investigating singlehood in a diverse range of communities so that important nuances regarding the interplay of social power and personal choices around relationships are given due attention.

Conclusions

Singlehood experiences are diverse and heterogeneous such that many singles experience positive outcomes and many others struggle. In this review, we adopted a within-group perspective and summarized intrapersonal factors, interpersonal experiences, and societal influences that are related to various facets of single people's well-being. Our review highlights that to be an inclusive field of singlehood, researchers need to pay attention to the diversity among singlehood experiences; some single people might crave relationships, some might find solo living challenging, some might be living lives full of connection and adventure, and some might be happier being single than they realize. These experiences are not mutually exclusive, the presence of one type of experience does not negate or invalidate the other, and a single individual may pass through all of these experiences and more in one lifetime. Indeed, singles might commonly find different aspects of singlehood simultaneously challenging (e.g., discrimination) and satisfying (e.g., friendships). Nonetheless, to counteract stigma around singlehood and encourage attention to positive narratives about single life, it is important to acknowledge that people can be happy and fulfill important psychological needs when single. It is our hope that adopting a within-group perspective toward singlehood will foster a desire to understand these and all single people better.

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