The Unrecognized Stereotyping and Discrimination Against Singles

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ABSTRACT—*A widespread form of bias has slipped under our cultural and academic radar. People who are single are targets of* **singlism***: negative stereotypes and discrimination. Compared to married or coupled people, who are often described in very positive terms, singles are assumed to be immature, maladjusted, and self-centered. Although the perceived differences between people who have and have not married are large, the actual differences are not. Moreover, there is currently scant recognition that singlism exists, and when singlism is acknowledged, it is often accepted as legitimate.*

KEYWORDS—*singles; stigma; discrimination; stereotypes; relationships*

For years, we have been studying what we call *singlism*, the stigmatizing of adults who are single. We have found evidence of singlism in the negative stereotypes and discrimination faced by singles (DePaulo, 2006; DePaulo & Morris, 2005a; DePaulo & Morris, 2005b). Although singlism is a nonviolent, softer form of bigotry than what is often faced by other stigmatized groups such as African Americans or gay men and lesbians, the impact of singlism is far ranging. Unlike more familiar isms such as racism, sexism, or heterosexism, singlism is not often recognized, and when it is pointed out, it is often regarded as legitimate.

WHO IS "SINGLE?"

We can define singles as legally single or socially single, though the two often overlap. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, over 40% of adults are legally single, including people who are divorced or widowed and those who have always been single. In everyday interactions, what matters most often is whether a person is socially single or socially coupled. People who are in sexual partnerships regarded as serious by themselves and others are socially coupled. Impressions of seriousness are shaped by factors such as the length of time the twosome has been together, the regularity and exclusivity with which they see each other, whether they seem to intend to stay together, and whether they live together.

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EVIDENCE OF SINGLISM

Negative Stereotypes of the Socially Single

We asked nearly 1,000 undergraduates to list the characteristics that came to mind when they thought about people who were married (in one condition) or single (in the other). Married people were more likely than singles to be described as mature, stable, honest, happy, kind, and loving. Singles were more often called immature, insecure, self-centered, unhappy, lonely, and ugly (but also, on the positive side, independent). The perceived differences between single and married people were often quite large. For example, married people were described as caring, kind, and giving almost 50% of the time, compared to only 2% of the time for singles (Morris, DePaulo, Hertel, & Ritter, 2006).

Next, we wanted to know whether singles are perceived even more negatively after they have passed the age at which most people marry. Groups of undergraduates and community members rated descriptions of single and married people. The targets were described as men or women and as 25 or 40 years old. All groups rated the singles as less socially mature, less well-adjusted, and more self-centered and envious than the married people (though also more independent and career-oriented). As we expected, the differences favoring married people were even greater when the targets were described as 40 years old than when they were described as 25. Still, though, there were significant differences even at the younger age.

Why should 25-year-olds be derogated simply because they are not yet married? As of the year 2004, at least half of all

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American women, and even more men, had not married by age 25. Maybe, we thought, young adults needed to show that they were at least working at coupling, to avoid getting stigmatized.

In another experiment, undergraduates read profiles describing students who were currently coupled, currently single, previously coupled, or always single. Working at coupling did matter. Students who were described as having current or past relationship experience were regarded as more socially mature, better-adjusted, and less self-centered than the others.

Discrimination Against Singles

Discrimination against single people is often legal. As of 2004, 23 states offered no protections from marital-status discrimination, and others offered only partial protections. Employers can legally subsidize health benefits for spouses of married employees (and sometimes domestic partners), while offering no comparable benefits to a parent, sibling, or friend of their single employees. That amounts to unequal compensation for the same work. Similarly, a married person in need of care can receive it from a spouse who is covered by the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), but singles who need care do not have anyone in their own generation who is eligible for FMLA benefits.

Single men are paid less than their married male colleagues even when they are of similar age and have comparable work experience. Marriage also brings increased tax benefits and social security benefits and discounts on automobile insurance, travel packages, and club memberships (reviewed in DePaulo, 2006).

We have also found experimental evidence of housing discrimination against singles (Morris, Sinclair, & DePaulo, 2006). In three studies, participants read descriptions of three applicants for a rental property and indicated their preferred lessee. Rental agents were much more likely to choose a married couple (60%) over a cohabiting romantic couple (23%) or a pair of friends (17%). Undergraduates' preference for the married couple was even stronger: 80% chose the married couple, as compared to just 12% choosing the cohabiting couple and 8% who chose the friends. Undergraduates also overwhelmingly favored a married couple (70%) over a single woman (18%) or a single man (12%). The preferences of the rental agents are particularly significant, as they raise the possibility that singles may be at a disadvantage when trying to find housing. Future research should explore this.

Byrne and Carr's (2005) analysis of a nationally representative sample found that people who have always been single and are not cohabiting with a romantic partner are more likely than married people to report experiencing (for example) poorer service in restaurants or condescending attitudes in everyday life. The authors controlled for many factors such as age, race, sexual orientation, and health, making a convincing case that singles really are slighted in their interpersonal experiences. But we still wondered whether singles themselves think they are discriminated against based upon their relationship status.

SINGLISM IS UNACKNOWLEDGED

What is especially interesting about singlism is that most people are unaware that singles are stigmatized at all. When we asked adults to list any groups to which they belonged that might be targets of negative stereotypes or discrimination, only 4% of singles spontaneously mentioned singles as such a category. When explicitly asked whether they thought singles might be a stigmatized group, only 30% of singles and 23% of coupled people said that they were. This level of awareness is low compared to the 100% of gay people, 90% of obese people, 86% of African Americans, and 72% of women who acknowledged their groups' stigma (Morris, 2005).

The practice of singlism is often considered acceptable. While many are outraged by discrimination based on race, gender, or sexual orientation, few people feel any injustice has occurred when a single person is targeted. When participants in an experiment read about housing discrimination against singles, they thought the practice was more legitimate and fair than when they read that the housing discrimination targeted a member of a recognized stigmatized group such as an African American person, a gay person, or an obese person (Morris, Sinclair, & DePaulo, 2006).

WHY ARE SINGLES STIGMATIZED?

Unfounded Stereotypes or Accurate Perceptions?

What if marriage really does transform people, such that they become strikingly happier than they were when they were single and much happier than their peers who have always been single? Then negative perceptions of single people as unhappy would seem more like accurate assessments than like unfair characterizations.

Meta-analytic reviews (summarized by DePaulo & Morris, 2005a) are sometimes said to support the claim that getting married makes people happier, because currently married people score higher on happiness than other groups. But the biggest differences are between the currently married and those who were previously married but are currently divorced or widowed. Getting married cannot account for those differences, because currently married, divorced, and widowed people all got married. The smallest difference ($r = .09$) is between the currently married and those who have always been single.

Nor can it be said that getting married and staying married makes people happy. The meta-analytic reviews summarize studies in which the single, married, and previously married people are all different people. So, the people who stayed married may have been happier than the other people even before they got married. A recent review suggests that happiness may indeed come first in the causal chain leading to other life outcomes (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005).

Definitive causal statements about marriage and happiness can never be made, because people cannot be randomly as-

signed to get married or stay single. Still, longitudinal research can provide an answer to an important question: When people marry, do they become happier than they were when they were single?

An 18-year longitudinal study of thousands of German adults analyzed by Richard Lucas and his colleagues suggests that the long-term answer is no (Lucas, 2005; Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2003). People who got married and stayed married experienced a small increase in happiness around the year of the wedding, but then their happiness returned to the level it was before. People who married and later divorced were already becoming less happy as the wedding day approached, a trend that did not reverse until the year before the divorce became final. (Their happiness then continued to increase; on the average, though, divorced people did not become as happy as they had been when they were single.)

People who stayed single throughout the study started out slightly less happy (0.2 points on an 11-point scale) than the people who would eventually get married and stay married. However, their mean happiness level was always squarely on the happy end of the scale (never more than 0.6 points lower than the continuously married). It was never as low as that of the divorced people the year before their divorce became official (and it was slightly higher than that of the divorced people for most other years, too). Also, the mean happiness level of the single people was never as low as that of the widowed people right after they were widowed.

The pattern of results is similar for health. People who have always been single are typically just as healthy, or only slightly less healthy, than people who have always been married. When there is a difference related to marital status, it is likely to be the previously married, not the continuously single, who are disadvantaged (DePaulo, 2006; Rook & Zettel, 2005).

Crandall and Warner (2005) argue that negative evaluations are indicative of prejudice, regardless of whether they are accurate. Claims about the transformative power of marriage, though, seem to be grossly exaggerated or just plain wrong. Getting married does not make people lastingly happier or definitively healthier.

Can Singlism Be Explained From an Evolutionary Perspective?

Evolutionary psychologists Pillsworth and Haselton (2005) have noted that we need "adaptations that promote successful mating, such as the basic desire to find a mate and have sex" (p. 98). Thus, people pay attention to whether others are single or coupled because this information is relevant to reproduction. However, the cultural assumption that coupling is the key to happiness is more difficult to explain. As Pillsworth and Haselton note, "the evolutionary perspective does not suggest that coupling will result in a healthier or more satisfying life for any particular individual. . . . In the modern world, coupling does not guarantee an on-average fitness benefit to couple members or their children" (p. 101).

A Cultural Lag in Perceptions?

As recently as the mid-20th century, there were big differences between single and married adults. Then, having sex or children outside of marriage was considered shameful. Women were more dependent on marriage for financial security. Adults married younger, and divorced less often, than they do now. In contrast, Americans today spend more years of their adult lives single than married. Many women earn enough to support themselves and sometimes children, too. Because of advances in birth control and reproductive technology, women can have sex without having children, and they can have children without having sex. Perhaps, then, the negative appraisals of single people are signs of cultural lag: Perceptions of single people have not yet caught up with their rapidly changing place in society (Byrne & Carr, 2005).

Singles as a Threat to Cultural Beliefs

DePaulo (2006) suggests that there is more than just cultural lag at work. In contemporary American society, there is a glorification of marriage and coupling that many single and married people accept uncritically. According to the marital mythology, finding a soul-mate is a transformative experience: Marrying that all-purpose, all-important partner can make a person happy and healthy and fulfill all emotional and social needs. The marital mythology is powerfully attractive, offering as it does a seemingly simple path to a rewarding and meaningful life. Singles—especially those who clearly lead fulfilling lives—challenge that belief system. Singlism serves to maintain cultural beliefs about marriage by derogating those whose lives challenge those beliefs.

THE PARADOX OF SINGLEHOOD

Singles are targeted with stereotyping and discrimination, and married people are glorified. Yet, paradoxically, getting married does not result in lasting improvements in well-being, and people who have always been single are not very different in health or happiness from people who have been continuously married. How is this possible?

Singles often maintain a diversified relationship portfolio, rather than investing so much in just one person. Even in their later years, when others expect them to be lonely and alone, they often enjoy networks of supportive relationships (Zettel, 2005). Social scientists who study adult relationships have focused overwhelmingly on romantic relationships. Perhaps it is time to give relationships with friends, siblings, and everyone else their due.

Single people who have the resources and opportunities to do so can pursue their passions and excel at work that they love.

They can embrace solitude as well as interpersonal engagement. If singles are increasingly living their lives fully, rather than marking time waiting for "the one," then the paradox begins to resolve itself. Maybe singles more often respond to stereotyping and discrimination with resilience than with victimization. Much more research will be needed to know for sure.

FUTURE RESEARCH

In our own work, we found evidence of singlism in the United States and Germany (Hertel, Schütz, DePaulo, Morris, & Stucke, in press). But as Pillsworth and Haselton have noted, "In most cultures around the globe, your spouse is not your best friend, or even your primary social partner" (p. 102). How are singles perceived in those cultures? Even within the United States, there is much left to learn about how singlism is shaped by factors such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and social class.

Reams of research reports have examined marital status as a predictor of well-being. Marital status, though, may be a poor proxy for more important predictors. Do people have the degree of social connectedness that they need and want, whether that is attained by cohabitation, embeddedness in a network of friends, or some other means? Are they living a life that they find engaging and meaningful?

The development of a new field of study offers great promise. Many of the most fundamental questions about singles and singlism have yet to be addressed, or even framed. The answers are likely to have implications for public policy and even for the way people conduct their everyday lives.

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