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The Contextual Nature and Function of Singlism

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We appreciate DePaulo and Morris's (this issue) efforts to initiate a dialogue about the psychology of singles. We agree with the authors' argument that by and large the topic of singles has been excluded from psychological literature and that research on singlehood has the potential to make important contributions. However, we do have a number of misgivings about placing the psychology of singles squarely in the domain of stigma. This is not an attempt to exclude the study of singles from mainstream research on stereotypes and prejudice, but rather an attempt to more fully consider the contexts in which singlehood is likely to be stigmatizing. We have two primary goals in this article. First, we attempt to contextualize the nature of singlehood and to draw inferences about for whom and under what circumstances singlehood will be stigmatizing. Second, we explore the function of singlism and offer suggestions for reducing this type of bias. We hope that this endeavor will help DePaulo and Morris, and others interested in singles, to further their research on this important and understudied topic.

Contextualizing Singlism: Situational and Individual Moderators

Stigmatized individuals possess or are perceived to possess an attribute or characteristic that conveys a devalued social identity within a social context (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998). Though all groups can be stigmatized in some situations (e.g., European Americans might be particularly aware of negative stereotypes about their ethnic group when participating in a diversity seminar at work), the psychological and social implications of stigma are most substantial for groups that are devalued across a wide range of contexts. If individuals can easily remove themselves from situations in which their social identity is devalued, then the stigma will have little impact on their daily life activities and future outcomes (Crocker et al., 1998; Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002). In this article, we argue that understanding whether singles are stigmatized requires examining the contextual nature of singlism. Following, we highlight several situational and personal moderating factors that may influence the extent to which singlehood will be stigmatizing. Our discussion is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather it is intended to offer a springboard for research in this area.

The Life Span as a Context

In their article, DePaulo and Morris (this issue) note that life begins as a single and that everyone is single, at least at some point in their life. Though singlehood is a universal life stage, it is interrupted for most individuals by marriage or serious coupling. Indeed, marriage is a normative social behavior in the United States, as at least 90% of singles will marry at some point in their life (Connidis, 2001). For our purposes, we define behavioral norms as dominant base rates for a given behavior (Blanton & Christie, 2003). Because marriage is a normative social behavior, it is useful to consider demographic information about the timing of marriage.

According to the 2003 United States census data, the average age of first marriage is 26.2 years (mean for men = 27.1; mean for women = 25.3). Because we were unable to locate the standard deviation for age at first marriage within the United States, we extrapolated from a data set of marriage timing in 2000 in Switzerland, Germany, and Austria that revealed an average first marriage age of 27.6 years and a standard deviation of 5.43 years (Winkler-Dworak & Engelhardt, 2000). Based on these European statistics, we conservatively estimated the standard deviation of age at first marriage for individuals in the United States' to be 5 years.

If one considers the age of first marriage within the context of normal distribution, then 95% of people who ultimately get married do so between the ages of 16.2 and 36.2 years of age. Thus, according to a normative understanding of marriage, individuals who break conventional behavioral patterns by choosing to remain single beyond age 36.2 can be considered non-normative.[1] In this article, we refer to singles older than 36.2 who have never been married as non-normative singles (versus normative singles who are unmarried prior to age 36.2). The term non-normative is not meant to be pejorative; it is used purely to describe behavior that differs from the typical trajectory.

[1]Because we are unaware of existing data charting the initiation of long-term coupling among gay men and lesbians, we will apply the same time frame to understanding these relationships. Thus, for our purposes here, gay men and women who are not engaged in serious coupling are considered non-normative singles after age 36.2. We recognize that this is potentially erroneous speculation and that it will be important for research to identify whether these coupling patterns are applicable to gay men and lesbians.

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Our rationale for separating singles into normative and non-normative categories stems from a desire to locate singlehood within cultural lifespan patterns. Singles younger than 36.2 years are unlikely to be viewed as members of the category single, but rather are likely to be viewed as potentially "marriable," "coupleable," or "temporarily single." In contrast, because non-normative singles have passed the time of normative coupling, they are more likely to be viewed as people who are unlikely to marry or become coupled. That is, they are viewed as probably "unmarriable," "uncoupleable," or "chronically single." In other words, non-normative singles will be perceived as belonging to a category of people who share something in common—an absence of a serious coupling.

Why might non-normative singles be especially likely to be perceived as belonging to the social category singles? A number of psychological perspectives argue that individuals are particularly attentive to non-normative and distinctive information when forming impressions of others and the self (Bem, 1972; Hamilton & Sherman, 1989; Jones & Davis, 1965; McGuire & Padawer-Singer, 1976). For example, attribution theory argues that non-normative behavior is especially likely to lead individuals to form dispositional attributions about others (e.g., Jones & Davis, 1965; Kelley, 1972). Additionally, research on the self-concept shows that individuals construct their personal self-concept by attending to their distinct attributes rather than their common attributes (McGuire & Padawer-Singer, 1976; Turnbull, Miller, & McFarland, 1990). Finally, Deviance Regulation Theory (Blanton & Christie, 2003) argues that identities become meaningful to both the self and others when those identities stem from actions that differentiate the individual from others. Thus, according to these theoretical perspectives, non-normative behaviors are a particularly relevant source of information and this type of information is especially relevant when considering who is perceived as or who perceives themselves as a member of any given social category.

Before proceeding, we deem it important to note that by focusing our discussion on non-normative singles, we do not mean to imply that normative singles never experience unfair treatment because of their single status. Rather, we believe that discrimination against normative singles is likely to be particularly circumscribed and likely to have few implications for their place in society (e.g., the stigmatization faced by European Americans who find themselves in the unusual situation of a diversity seminar). We are reminded here of Heider's (1958, p. 253) distinction between the "total relevance" and "local relevance" of events (see also Schmitt & Branscombe, 2002 for an application of this idea to prejudice). Discriminatory events occurring to normative singles may have implications for the immediate situation (i.e., they are high in local relevance) but likely have few implications for their place in the larger world (i.e., they are low in total relevance). Heider noted that total relevance, rather than local relevance, is critical in understanding the psychological impact of life events. Because discriminatory events occurring to normative singles are unlikely to have a great deal of total relevance, isolated discriminatory experiences are not representative of the type of pervasive and chronic devaluation that DePaulo and Morris (this issue) refer to as singlism.

Situational Identity Salience

Even among non-normative singles, single status will not always be the most salient aspect of their social identity. Singlehood occurs within the context of multiple identities (e.g., race, gender, social status), and the salience of singlehood can differ as a function of these other identities (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). For example, a single woman who works in a predominately male field is likely to experience her gender as more salient than her singlehood. Thus, she will probably categorize herself along gender lines rather than marital status lines. Similarly, the colleagues of an African American single man in a predominately White workplace might be especially aware of his racial status rather than his less visible marital status. Recent social cognition work demonstrated that when individuals possess multiple social identities, other individuals and the targets themselves engage in cognitive processing whereby one aspect of the identity remains activated while the remaining aspects become inhibited (Hugenburg & Bodenhausen, 2004; Macrae, Bodenhausen, & Milne, 1995). Thus, if a single person belongs to multiple social categories, the singles identity may be inhibited when those other categories are particularly salient. In these situations singles-based categorization and subsequent negative treatment may be diminished and singles might be less likely to perceive unfair treatment stemming from their singles social identity.

Just as some settings are likely to result in inhibition of the singles identity, other situations might be particularly likely to increase the salience of singlehood and to decrease the salience of other competing identities. For example, in some social settings, such as weddings or formal parties, the singles identity might experience increased activation while other social identities are in turn inhibited. For example, at his friend's wedding, single Zach might be seated at a "potpourri table" comprised of a variety of singles, including Juli (the bride's cousin from Chicago) and Fred (the groom's childhood next-door neighbor), rather than with his existing married friends who also are attending the wedding. Likewise, at a family gathering, a single woman might feel particularly aware of her single status as her "well-meaning" relatives pry into her social life and ask

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whether she is dating anyone. Similarly, the single identity might be keenly activated in settings that focus on family values and couplehood, such as religious ceremonies and political contexts. In short, there are some settings where the singles social identity is particularly likely to be activated and these circumstances may be especially likely to promote singlism.

Chronic Identity Salience

Finally, just as some situations differ in their likelihood of activating the singles identity, single individuals will also differ in their level of chronic activation of this identity. Research on stigma demonstrates that individuals will differ in the importance they place on their social identity as well as in their chronic expectations about how their group is treated in society (see Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002 for a review of this literature). Because of differential personal and socialization experiences, some individuals might be particularly sensitive to signs that singles are devalued and others might be entirely oblivious to this possibility. Likewise, some individuals will view their singlehood as an important part of their self-concept and others will see it as a minor part of who they are. The more central the identity is to one's self-concept and the more one anticipates facing singlism, the more likely they will be to perceive singlism in ambiguous situations (Major et al., 2002).

Summary

Thus far, we argued that the predicament of singlism is most appropriate in describing the experiences of non-normative singles. Because non-normative singles are perceived as chronically single, negative treatment on the basis of their civil status is likely to have a high degree of total relevance. Additionally, we argued that the salience of competing social identities within a given context will be important in understanding when the singles social identity is activated and when it might serve as a basis of discrimination. Finally, we noted that individuals differ in their chronic level of activation of this identity and this level of activation will influence the extent to which they perceive themselves as the target of unfair treatment stemming from the single identity. Having provided some contextual basis for understanding singlism, we next turn toward examining the function of singlism.

The Function of Singlism

What is the purpose of singlism and why are non-normative singles particularly likely to face this form of social rejection? Non-normative singles convey something that at first glance threatens a fundamental human need—the need to belong and to feel loved (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1969; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Baumeister and Leary (1995) argued that humans have a fundamental need to experience frequent pleasant interactions with a small number of stable relationship partners. Because marriage and serious coupling generally involve the expectation of long-term exclusive commitment, these types of relationships are well-suited to satisfying this need. Marriage and serious coupling are likely the most accessible adult relationships that are considered capable of satisfying this need (Hazan & Zeifman, 1999). It is this belief that forms the basis of what DePaulo and Morris (this issue) refer to as "The Ideology of Marriage and Family."

The Ideology of Marriage and Family serves an important function for those who endorse it. It provides individuals with a sense of control over their potential to fulfill the need to belong and to feel loved. By endorsing this belief system, individuals come to believe that anyone is capable of getting married and that marriage is a panacea in fulfilling belongingness needs. Because being alone is one of the most pervasive human fears (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), individuals will be motivated to endorse the Ideology of Marriage and Family. In other words, the Ideology of Marriage and Family becomes an unquestioned component of North American culture because it protects individuals from feeling vulnerable to perceived capricious events, such as failing to find a long-term romantic partner and the dissolution of a serious coupling.

Belief systems such as those underlying the Ideology of Marriage and Family can be taken for granted only to the extent that they go unchallenged. When individuals encounter evidence that challenges important beliefs, they experience threat and face a decision about whether to modify their existing belief system or integrate the inconsistent evidence into the belief system (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1997; Lerner, 1980). A great deal of research demonstrates that individuals tend to prefer the latter solution, and attempt to maintain their beliefs about the world by integrating inconsistent information into their belief systems (e.g., Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Lerner, 1980). When individuals encounter evidence that challenges important belief systems, they are often motivated to derogate the source of this threat so that their beliefs about the world can remain intact (Greenberg et al., 1997; Lerner, 1980). Drawing on this literature, Jones et al. (1984) argued that we often stigmatize others because they serve as a reminder of our deepest fears and thus threaten our well-being. Jones et al. (1984) described this predicament as "the peril of stigma" (p. 81) and noted that stigmatizing conditions "… stand as a stark reminder of the very things we devote so much of our individual and collective energies to shutting out, ignoring, and avoiding" (p. 86).

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Non-normative singles, by their very existence, should be threatening because they remind individuals of the potential that they too could experience an unfortunate twist of fate that could deprive them of a serious coupling, and by extension the fulfillment of the need to belong. To hold onto the Ideology of Marriage and Family, individuals may find it easier to stigmatize and derogate the character of individual singles rather than acknowledge that the ideology is inaccurate and that they too might face the possibility of a future without a serious coupling. In other words, stigmatizing non-normative singles functions to help individuals protect themselves from the terrifying possibility that they too might one day be alone.

Ironically, non-normative singles who appear satisfied with life might pose the strongest challenge to the Ideology of Marriage and Family. Happy singles challenge the notion that romantic love is essential for meeting belonging needs. In essence, individuals might feel more comfortable if non-normative singles were miserable, because this would provide evidence that the Ideology of Marriage and Family is correct and that their own romantic relationships play a unique part in their happiness. If individuals are unable to convince themselves that happy non-normative singles are miserable, then they may take an alternative route toward integrating these individuals into their worldview. One way individuals can accomplish this is by subtyping these singles as exceptions to the rule (Richards & Hewstone, 2001). By doing this, individuals are able to maintain their belief in the validity of the Ideology of Marriage and Family.

Reducing Singlism

Understanding why non-normative singles are stigmatized is an important step in developing strategies for reducing singlism. Our analysis of singlism suggests that simply showing that non-normative singles are happy and satisfied with life may not be sufficient in reducing negative attitudes toward them. Instead, evidence showing that non-normative singles *are not typically lonely* might be a more effective strategy. If researchers begin to demonstrate whether belongingness needs can be met with nonromantic, close, stable relationships, then evidence could be accumulated to understand what types of relationships effectively satisfy the need to belong. Indeed, we believe that the push toward studying the psychological consequences of nonromantic relationships is one of the most important lessons to be gleaned from DePaulo and Morris's article (this issue). If research finds that some nonromantic relationships are especially adept at meeting the need to belong, then non-normative singles may no longer activate the construct of loneliness and thus will no longer pose a strong threat to the need to belong. Furthermore, evidence that non-normative singles are not lonely may help to gradually change the Ideology of Marriage and Family. In sum, by studying how nonromantic relationships contribute to the need to belong, researchers can develop an important knowledge base that may be able to address the psychological experience of singlehood.

Conclusions

When we read DePaulo and Morris (this issue), we were somewhat uncomfortable with placing singlism alongside racism, sexism, and other stigmas that individuals oftentimes chronically struggle with in our culture. We were able to disentangle and address this discomfort, to some extent, by more precisely defining the context of singlehood that might engender substantial singlism. We suspect, however, that even with the more focused analysis placed on what we have called non-normative singles, research from a stigma perspective may not be the most fruitful avenue to pursue. Instead, we encourage researchers to probe this phenomenon from the close relationships angle. For example, very little is known about adult friendships, especially those friendships that support unmarried and uncoupled individuals. Although close relationships research often focuses on dating and marriage, as DePaulo and Morris point out, many of us spend more time single than coupled, and so understanding the experience of singlehood is indeed an important undertaking.

Notes

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