European Journal of Women's Studies
1–15
© The Author(s) 2017
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/1350506817702411
journals.sagepub.com/home/ejw
SAGE

'I don't think this woman had anyone in her life': Loneliness and singlehood in *Six Feet Under*

Neta Yodovich
University of Manchester, UK

Kinneret Lahad
Tel Aviv University, Israel

Abstract
This article offers a critical analysis of representations of loneliness and singlehood, embodied in the narrative of the 'old maid's' lonely death. The study contributes to a complex understanding of single women and the resignification of emotions conventionally ascribed to this category. By bridging the gap between two rarely linked bodies of knowledge – singlehood and the sociology of emotions – the authors do not ask what loneliness *is*, but, following Sara Ahmed's work, rather what loneliness *does*. To this end, this article employs a content analysis of versatile media texts, focusing on the acclaimed television series *Six Feet Under*, a polysemic text which juxtaposes both conservative and subversive meanings. The study contributes both to the vibrant discussion of social emotions as well as to the existing critical scholarship about singlehood, and seeks to challenge the limited set of representations attached to single women, and hegemonic ideals of family and solitary life.

Keywords
Death/dying, loneliness, media text, singlehood, social emotions

Introduction

In 2011, Carol Morley, a British film director, wrote an article for the British newspaper *The Guardian* about her recent documentary, *Dreams of a Life* (2011), based on the life

Corresponding author:
Neta Yodovich, Department of Sociology, School of Social Sciences, University of Manchester, Manchester M13 9PL, UK.
Email: neta.yodovich@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

and death of Joyce Vincent, a single woman whose death went unnoticed for more than two years. In the piece, Morley observes:

> I first heard about Joyce when I picked up a discarded copy of the *Sun* on a London underground train. The paper reported the gothic circumstances of her death – 'Woman dead in flat for three years: skeleton of Joyce found on sofa with telly still on' … The image of the television flickering over her decomposing body haunted me as I got off the train on to the crowded platform. In a city such as London, home to 8 million people, how could someone's absence go unnoticed for so long? Who was Joyce Vincent? What was she like? How could she have been forgotten? (Morley, 2011)

Vincent's death, and in particular the circumstances of her death, were extensively reported in the British press, in some ways reflecting the sensationalized coverage of the solitary deaths of single women. Examples include Hadviga Golik, whose skeletal remains were found in Croatia 42 years after her death (Watson, 2008), and Lucie McNulty, from Portland, whose dead body was found two and half years after her death (Graham and Russell, 2016).

These sensationalized news reports can be interpreted as a form of moral panic (Cohen, 1972) by which a condition or a group of people are identified as threats to societal values and norms, and are then presented in the media in a limited and stereotypical manner. This is done in order to induce fear in the general population. In this article, we argue, the media generate and facilitate a moral panic discourse about singlehood, loneliness/aloneness and its deterministic consequences. This kind of moral panic is, of course, also applicable to single men. In *Single Arguments for the Uncoupled*, Michael Cobb writes that loneliness is so upsetting that it is 'often displaced onto singles' (2012: 41). Cobb is right by applying this assumption to both single men and single women. Nevertheless, the discussion of loneliness and singlehood does require an intersectional analysis which takes into consideration how singlehood varies according to gender, age, class, religion, ethnicity, ableness, sexual orientation or other axes of social differentiation.[1]

Bearing this in mind our focus here will be solely on single, white, able-bodied middle-class women. Our choice to focus on single women derives from our attempt to understand how patriarchy and heteronormativity affect the emotional discourses regarding women's lives in media culture. From this vantage point, we explore the effects of *compulsory heterosexuality* (Rich, 1980) by which we bring up the cultural mechanisms that direct women into being sexually involved with men and maintain women as sexually, emotionally and reproductively available to men. This is one of the reasons why long-term singlehood is still seen by many as an unfeasible option for women. It does not conform to gendered expectations. These expectations denote that the social worth of women is defined by their relationships with men and the prevailing conviction that the primary role of a woman is to care for her husband and children. (The representation of the lonely deaths of single men deserves a further study, which is beyond the scope of the current study.[2])

Narratives about single women who died alone assume a central place in popular culture and were referenced in television series and films like *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), *Bones* (2005– 2017), *Bridget Jones's Diary* (2001–2016) and *Six Feet Under* (2001–2005). They struck what seems to be social nerve: the narrative of the single

woman who ages and dies alone, not to be discovered until a great deal of time afterwards. The social warning inherent in these texts cannot be any clearer: living alone as a single woman above a certain age can lead to the ultimate social punishment: loneliness, isolation and a lonely death (Lahad, 2014). Another interesting feature of the 'old maid who died alone' image is that while it places emphasis on what is constructed as the death of the lonely woman, it overlooks the gloomy image of a blasé and indifferent society. This outlook, one infused with strong overtones of panic, allocates the blame to single women themselves, who are held responsible for their 'inability' to 'unsingle' themselves (DePaulo, 2006; Lahad, 2013, 2014).

However, these very texts, along with recent studies of singlehood (e.g. Byrne, 2003; Cobb, 2012; Lahad, 2014, 2016, 2017; Reynolds, 2013; Taylor, 2011; Trimberger, 2005), could be reinterpreted as a challenge to heteronormative life scripts. These studies attempt to debunk the plethora of prejudices towards single women, alongside calls to rethink the discursive production of singlehood as merely a social problem and pathology (Budgeon, 2008; Byrne, 2000; Byrne and Carr, 2005; Jamieson and Simpson, 2013; Lahad, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2017; Reynolds, 2013; Trimberger, 2005). In these scholarly works, being single is framed as an asset; accordingly, women describe their solo life course in terms of individuality and of self-actualization. Contemporary research depicts singlehood as a lifestyle which enables many women to pursue satisfying careers, invest in friendship relations and/or enjoy travelling (Lahad, 2016, 2017; Simpson, 2006; Taylor, 2011; Trimberger, 2005). Here, we argue that despite these important discussions, the almost automatic association of loneliness to long-term singlehood remains surprisingly undertheorized and unaddressed within feminist cultural studies literature.

Therefore, this article joins previous studies in the attempt to critically scrutinize the position of the single woman in society and in media culture. We do so by focusing on the cultural narrative that is presented in various media texts, through an analysis of one episode, 'The Invisible Woman', of the critically acclaimed television series *Six Feet Under*. As will be discussed in detail later, *Six Feet Under* offers both conventional and subversive readings of singlehood and dying alone; it presents the clichéd narrative of the single woman dying alone, while simultaneously proposing an alternative, even subversive, reading to the dominant meanings ascribed to female singlehood and loneliness. It is for these reasons that we consider *Six Feet Under* as a polysemic text (Fiske, 1986), one which delivers different meanings to different viewers, and is itself a site of struggle, opening up the possibility of oppositional readings to media culture (Fiske, 1987).

To this end, we will juxtapose two areas of studies and theories that are rarely linked: the literatures of singlehood and of the cultural politics of emotions, in particular promoting a surprising absence in this literature – a critical assessment of aloneness, solitude and loneliness. Interestingly, while some areas of research in both emotions and singlehood have garnered significant (relatively speaking) scholarly interest, other topics such as loneliness and the construction of emotion in relation to singlehood remain understudied. By linking the recent literature of singlehood studies and the social and cultural studies of emotions and affects (Ahmed, 2004a, 2004b; Barbalet, 2002; Burkitt, 1997; Hochschild, 1983, 2003; Illouz, 1997, 2007; Kemper, 1978, 1987; Klinenberg, 2012; Reynolds, 2013; Swidler, 2013, Thoits, 1989, 1990, 2004), we seek to address the gaps between both fields of scholarship, and to further complicate contemporary discourse

about loneliness and gendered subjectivities. Thus, this article's contribution will be to bridge the two literatures; this in turn will allow us to problematize automatic ascriptions of loneliness to singlehood, to deliberate on this process of interpretation, and to recognize its blindspots.

Sara Ahmed's groundbreaking work (2004a, 2004b, 2008, 2010) on the cultural politics of emotions is particularly influential in this respect. Ahmed conceptualizes emotions as movements, and her work consistently illuminates how emotions stick to certain bodies while reflecting and promoting desired social values. According to Ahmed, emotions are not located in individuals, but directed towards objects. Therefore, some objects are considered inherently 'happy', 'sad', or 'lonely'. In following her line of analysis lies another original contribution of our article: we do not ask what *loneliness is*, but rather what loneliness *does*? In other words, we explore the discursive ways in which loneliness *sticks* (Ahmed, 2010) and is ascribed to certain signs and bodies (such as the single woman), as well as the ways it assists in securing hierarchical modes of living and feeling. Extending this argument, we suggest that the circulation of loneliness is fuelled by powerful heteronormative, familist ideologies, and in turn shapes some of our most common understandings of loneliness and what society considers as worthy living.

Our analysis will begin with a review of the existing literature related to our research topics; it will then move to a textual analysis of representations of the old maid and her lonely death in media texts, with a particular focus on *Six Feet Under*. The next section will continue the critical dissection of the episode, and demonstrate the ways in which it enables a complex and polysemic reading of singlehood and its ascribed emotions. The article concludes with a discussion of this study's findings, and will establish the argument for a more multilayered approach of aloneness, loneliness and diversified picture of solo living.

Singlehood, loneliness, solitude

In *Loneliness of the Dying*, Norbert Elias claimed that 'If a person must feel while dying that, though still alive, he or she has scarcely any significance for other people, that person is truly lonely' (2001: 64). Similarly, Rubin Gotesky (1965) postulated that loneliness emerges when the desire to connect to others fails. In his notable work about loneliness, Gotesky (1965) distinguished between *aloneness, loneliness, isolation* and *solitude*. While aloneness is perceived as a human condition and derived from our individuality, loneliness occurs when the desire to interact with others is not fulfilled. If the feeling of failure persists and loneliness lingers on, the individual will consequently feel isolation, and perceive loneliness as inevitable and permanent. However, and in opposition to the grim state of isolation, in solitude the individual is also alone, but does not feel lonely and is content with the state of aloneness. Nonetheless, Gotesky (1965) claimed that solitude is an unattainable state for most, due to our innate desire to socialize. Thus, failure to connect and create significant bonds with others will ultimately lead to loneliness and isolation.

Loneliness is commonly identified as a horrific and agonizing existence, one that should be avoided at all costs (Peplau and Perlman, 1982; Rokach, 1990), and that is usually accompanied by social taboo and embarrassment (Weiss, 1973). Mead (1980)

and Goffman (1977), for instance, both notably described activities such as eating in restaurants, going to the movies or on a vacation, that when practised alone are considered unhappy, lonely and discomforting.

One of the most iconic representations of loneliness could be found in the cliché of the old maid. The old maid, *la vielle fille* (French), or the *veechia zitella* (Italian), is a common idiom across cultures, representing the figure of the single woman unable to find a long-term romantic partner (Byrne, 2000; DePaulo, 2006; Lahad, 2014; Macvarish, 2006; Taylor, 2011). Since the old maid 'failed' to establish a family of her own (a husband and children, according to the prevalent heteronormative narrative) common wisdom bestows upon her a particularly gloomy future: ageing and dying alone. As has been argued elsewhere, the old maid figure can be seen as the locus within which larger social tensions and anxieties are concentrated and revealed (Lahad, 2017), and accordingly perceives late singlehood as a discursive formation constituted and forged through social norms and expectations. As will be shown below, it can stimulate moral panic, and distort and decontextualize the threat allegedly posed by not marrying and having children.

One example of the cultural script attached to the presumed terrifying, somewhat predetermined death of the single woman can be found in an episode of the successful television series *Sex and the City*. In the episode 'Four Women and a Funeral' (Season 2, Episode 5), Miranda moves into a new apartment, previously owned by an old single woman who had been discovered dead in the apartment approximately a week after her death. According to the scandalized gossip, by the time the neighbours realized she was dead, she had already been half-eaten by one of her cats. Later, after Miranda accidently chokes on her food while watching television, she calls Carrie, terrified by the thought that if she died right there, she will 'forever be that dead girl, who watched bad TV. I'm going to die alone!' A similar exaggerated death scenario is also illustrated by another iconic single woman, Bridget Jones (from the *Bridget Jones's Diary* franchise), when Jones observes that she fears she will end up dying alone, as wild dogs devour her decomposing body.

Another sensational example can be found in an episode from the television series *Bones*. Across the first seasons of the series, Dr Temperance Brennan is depicted as a 30-something, established forensic anthropologist, with a strong aversion to long-term romantic relationships. However, after Brennan is signed on to solve the lonely death and decomposition of a successful single female surgeon – who even bears a striking physical resemblance to her – Brennan has a change of heart in regard to her own singlehood; after enjoying the life of a contented single woman for many years, she precipitately rushes into the arms of a colleague, scared that she will also eventually die and decay alone.

Extended singlehood presents us with a case of moral panic. These lonely, horrific deaths (or the fear of one) not only demonstrate the single woman's lack of a romantic partner, but also hold the conception that she lacks all kinds of intimate and emotional relationships. Within this context, Gotesky's (1965) formulation of isolation, as the condition in which an individual experiences an intense and elongated loneliness, is particularly relevant here. This mode of isolation is reflected in many of the narratives described above, in which single women are horrified by the prospect that they are doomed to live a lonely existence, with no hope to ever bond with other persons. Indeed, one could claim that the

old maid is isolated from society and is deprived not just from conjugal and maternal ties, but from any sort of human and social companionship and thus poses a substantial threat to social values (Cohen, 1972: 9). Thus, these narratives cast single women as folk devils, responsible, and therefore accountable, for endangering the moral fabric of society.

This is quite an apt example of what Bella DePaulo terms 'singlism' (2006), the stigma and prejudice directed towards single persons. Similar attitudes can be identified in Anne Byrne's analysis of single women's experiences in Ireland. For Byrne, singlehood is perceived as an experience of 'missing being with others, missing intimacy, and missing motherhood and children' (2008: 24). Byrne's interviewees paint a picture of isolated lives, being excluded from social events, family gatherings or leisure time with co-workers just because they were single. Similar findings were elaborated upon by Jan Macvarish, as one of her interviewees described that she was not 'the most important person to anybody' (Macvarish, 2006: 5). Despite this morose understanding, the interviewee reported that she found solace in the thought that she could be 'semi-important' to a myriad of people. However, as was mentioned before, narratives of single women who are content with their marital state are scarce, both in academic research and in media culture.

In what follows, we examine the discursive construction of loneliness associated with singlehood through the script of horror of 'dying alone', based on content analysis of various media culture texts and focusing on the episode 'The Invisible Woman' from the television series *Six Feet Under*. We have approached these texts as a rich source of data, as we view them – and especially *Six Feet Under* – as polysemic texts (Fiske, 1986; Hall, 1973), juxtaposing hegemonic and subversive meanings. While other media texts, such as *Bridget Jones*, *Sex and the City* and *Bones* ultimately reinforce the common narrative of dying alone as an old maid, *Six Feet Under* stands out for its multilayered portrayal of singlehood and loneliness.

Six Feet Under tells the bitter-sweet story of the Fisher family, which includes Ruth, a newly widowed mother of three; her sons Nate and David, who are both in their thirties; and daughter Claire, a high-school student. The family negotiates the trials and tribulations of death, life, love and heartbreak while running a funeral home. *Six Feet Under* was selected as a suitable focal point for this article due to its multifaceted portrayal of singlehood and loneliness, in a fashion that both preserves and subverts the discourse regarding these two notions.

This research draws on methods taken from critical and feminist critical discourse analysis methods (Fairclough, 2003; Foucault, 1982; Lazar, 2007). In essence, we explore the social processes that (re)produce and reflect everyday sense-making through discourse. This line of enquiry is particularly attuned to subtle and explicit forms of sexism and heteronormative assumptions with regard to singlehood and representations of dying alone. By employing this methodological framework, we explore the interpretative process through which loneliness is *stuck* onto singlehood via the narrative of lonely death of the single woman.

'The Invisible Woman': Loneliness in *Six Feet Under*

By turning now to the episode 'The Invisible Woman' from the series *Six Feet Under*, we delve into our discussion about singlehood and loneliness. The episode begins with the

death of Emily Previn, a 47-year-old Caucasian (and presumed to be a middle-class) single woman. In a short opening scene, Emily chokes on her food while eating dinner alone in front of the television. After a short struggle, Emily collapses and dies. In the following scene, Emily's body can be seen lying on the kitchen floor, covered with ants. Emily's landlord and her neighbour enter her house following the neighbour's complaint about the pungent smell emanating from Emily's house. The two walk into the kitchen, and find Emily's decaying body.

The image of Emily covered with ants echoes similar narratives referenced in *Sex and the City* and *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Emily Previn, and her fellow single women, were found (or were scared of being found) in degrading positions, perhaps implying the almost inevitable consequence of their long-term singlehood. This trope, of singlehood and consequent punishment, can also be found in the premise of *The Lobster*, in which singles who do not find a mate are doomed to live as animals for the rest of their lives. The death of the single woman surrounded by – and at times eaten by – animals could be seen as a metaphorical representation of the inferior status bestowed upon single women by society at large. As feminist scholars have argued, this association of women and animals resides within a patriarchal, heteronormative conceptual framework, one which justifies the domination of women and the superiority of men over them, as they are presumed to be more primal and animalistic than men (Donovan, 1995; Spelman, 1982).

In another scene, the Fisher family has taken charge of Emily's funeral arrangements. Emily's pre-need (funeral arrangements made before one's death) is quite elaborate, and contains a guest list and specific guidelines for an open-casket ceremony. However, when Nate Fisher attempts to contact the invitees, he discovers that most of them are either unable or unwilling to come (some are dead, others are afraid of flying), and that even Emily's preferred priest will not attend the ceremony. When Nate tells his family about this, he declares:

> Now we know why she wasn't found for a week. I don't think this woman had anyone in her life.

Echoing the conventional narrative of the old maid, it is presumed that not only was Emily without a romantic partner, she lacked all social ties and lived in what appears to be a complete state of isolation (Byrne, 2000; Gotesky, 1965). Emily was not 'the most important person in anyone's life' (Macvarish, 2006: 5), so much so that none of her invitees bothered to attend her funeral. Emily was alone in life and in death, as her social death preceded her physical death (Sudnow, 1967). According to this line of interpretation, it would appear that Emily's life represents the widespread image of the single status as a deficit identity, defined by the lack of close human relationships (Byrne, 2000; Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003). This reflects how loneliness in Ahmed's words does not reside in subjects or objects but are produced as effects of circulation (Ahmed, 2004a: 8). One of the effects of what loneliness does is to erect a clear boundary between 'us' and 'her'.

However, when Nate explains Emily's situation to his baffled family, a discussion filled with speculations in regard to her character is sparked between them. David Fisher

raises the possibility that Emily lived a similar lifestyle to a news story he once read about,

> A high-functioning autistic person, who didn't need people. She just had a job designing big cattle slaughter houses and at night, she came home and sat in this little machine that made her feel like she was being hugged. That was all the intimacy she needed.

David compares Emily's life to who we can assume to be Temple Grandin, the well-known professor of animal science and advocate for the autism community. Here, Emily's lifestyle is portrayed in pathological terms. As written elsewhere (Byrne, 2000; DePaulo, 2006; Lahad, 2014, 2017; Macvarish, 2006; Taylor, 2011), late singlehood is regularly associated with negative and pathological social connotations. Similarly, David's remark exemplifies that loneliness is pathologized through a medicalized rhetoric of difference.

Later, Federico, who works in body restoration at the Fishers' funeral home, informs Nate that Emily's body was found in such a state of decomposition that he is unable to restore her body. Nate, who is still baffled by Emily's assumed loneliness, wonders if she was 'some vicious asshole, just twisted and evil', as he describes it.

The figure of the vicious, evil single woman pertains and justifies heteronormative and singlist forms of oppression. Within this context it allows us to examine what are the effects of loneliness and what it does. Differently put, loneliness circulates 'between bodies examining how they stick as well as move' (Ahmed, 2004a: 4).

In an effort to restore her body, Emily's cadaver is punctured by Federico, releasing a pungent odour into the room and causing Federico and Nate to gag. Once more, Emily is presented in a degrading, dehumanized way, and the principal character in this scene speculates that she was 'twisted and evil'. Our contention here is that these exaggerated and disproportionate moral judgements position Emily as an uncanny force who poses a threat to social order. Again, the single woman becomes a folk devil, positioned as a threat against the well-being of the community. Like the image of the crazy cat lady (Lahad, 2014, 2017), the figure here of the single woman is taken to represent a grotesque, even evil, entity, with the potential to contaminate others with her supposedly hideous, lonely presence.

Drawing from Mary Douglas's classical distinction between the pure and the dangerous, nature and culture (2003), the single woman is perceived here as a polluting presence, which others should distance themselves from, for fear of contagion. The presentation of Emily's body in a repulsive manner vividly illustrates that fear. Nate automatically assumes that Emily must have been a terrible, mean person, and that her isolation was because of her dreadful nature. Nate's immediate judgement of Emily's character exemplifies how singlehood is an object which conjures up negative emotions, which are then stuck onto it (Ahmed, 2004a, 2008, 2010), inducing a media climate of moral panic. As Ahmed cogently claims, it is through emotions that surfaces and bodies are made (2004a).

However, a different reading of Emily's life and death may suggest an alternative interpretation for her single status and emotive life. For example, while the Fishers try to decipher Emily's life, Claire suggests a different narrative with regard to Emily's life:

> I don't see why this person has to be mentally ill, just because she had a life that doesn't conform to some familiar image that we have in our heads. Maybe she was living the life she wanted, without the hassle of other people.

A similar comment came from Nate in another scene, while trying to comfort his mother, Ruth Fisher, who was distressed over Emily's story:

> Maybe she liked solitude. Maybe she lived the life she wanted and she was happy.

Here, Claire and Nate suggest that perhaps Emily distanced herself from others of her own volition and was content with her solo lifestyle. As such, it may be that Emily's life was solitary, not isolated (Gotesky, 1965). Contrary to the notion of isolation or loneliness, solitude is positively accepted and is quite often associated with writers, philosophers and spiritual messengers (Koch, 1994; Long and Averill, 2003). Solitude, according to Long and Averill (2003), is a chosen position from which one can challenge and distance oneself from hegemonic social norms. This line of interpretation is in tune with some of Georg Simmel's thoughts about the mental attitude of metropolitans. Although Simmel's essay was written about the detachment of the new city dwellers at the beginning of the 20th century, his unique outlook sheds light on the opportunities for freedom and individuality that single women may have. One's state of aloneness could also be seen as a way of not only protecting oneself from the massive stimulation of the senses in the urban city (Simmel et al., 1997) but also as a way for challenging the prescribed and naturalized heteronormative ideal of family life.

Claire and Nate's observations demonstrate then a counter-hegemonic position, one in which long-term singlehood does not necessarily determine loneliness or represent a pathological state. This line of thinking is in tune with some recent findings from singlehood scholarship, which suggest that many single women value their freedom, and are comfortable with the life they have (Budgeon, 2008; Jamieson and Simpson, 2013; Lahad, 2016; Roseneil, 2007; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004). Indeed, more and more single women publicly and consistently repudiate conventional life-course trajectories and couple-oriented living arrangements. However, such paths are still rarely recognized in mainstream society, and reflect the need to harness conventional hegemonic discourses, among them the pathological perspective concerning women living on their own.

However, the suggestion that Emily might have experienced loneliness, happiness or solitude may be misconstrued. Probing Emily's pre-need reveals that she had a lengthy and detailed guest list of people that she thought would wish to say goodbye to her. In addition, Emily asked to be presented in an open casket with Whitney Houston's song *And I am Telling You I'm not Going* playing in the background (which the Fishers saw as a witty and amusing song choice). Emily's pre-need could refute the narrative which subsumes the cultural script of singlehood, loneliness and isolation, but at the same time cast doubt on the counter-interpretation which connotes aloneness with chosen solitude. Beyond the fact that Emily was a single woman, we know nothing about her other than speculation. However, the episode illustrates another narrative about loneliness – the loneliness of Ruth Fisher, the mother figure in *Six Feet Under*.

'I want intimacy!': Disturbing the binary relationship between loneliness and togetherness

Six Feet Under's uniqueness lies in its complex illustrations of human relations. In previous sections, we presented both the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses elaborated in the show with regard to singlehood and loneliness. Now, we will focus on another sub-plot presented in the episode, one which demonstrates that loneliness could be experienced within the family as well, and which further problematizes the concept of loneliness. Now, we would like to discuss Ruth Fisher's loneliness as presented throughout the episode.

The first indication of what could be interpreted as Ruth's loneliness appears in a dream sequence, following the Fishers' discussion about Emily's death. In Ruth's dream, she is cleaning a spot off the kitchen table, but it doesn't come off. She opens the kitchen cabinet only to find that it is empty, and that her home is suddenly entirely vacant as well. She walks into the living room and finds herself lying on the couch. She then bends forward over her sleeping self, crying out 'Get up!'

When discussing the family as a 'happy object', Sara Ahmed emphasizes the presence of the kitchen table in family life. Ahmed notes, 'the table is itself a happy object … which gives form to the family as a social gathering, as a tangible thing over which the family gathers' (2008: 12). Ahmed's interpretation of the table as a happy object accentuates the loneliness that one may feel when seeing it bare. Therefore, the viewer is given the opportunity to insinuate Ruth's loneliness from this scene, or perhaps her fears of withering away in an empty, abandoned house, in a similar way to the cautionary tale that is told to single women (Lahad, 2014; Lahad and Hazan, 2014). Time and again the 'happy family' (Ahmed, 2010) is conceptualized through its binary opposition to singlehood. This pervasive view conjures and engrains the stickiness of loneliness onto the singlehood experience, and cements the family as a main provider of love and intimacy. However, *Six Feet Under* presents a different portrayal of familial ties by focusing on Ruth Fisher.

Throughout the episode, Ruth seems deeply touched by Emily's story. Once she realizes that Nate and David do not plan to follow Emily's pre-need – since no one will be attending the funeral – Ruth insists they will orchestrate the funeral according to her wishes. She insists on going to Emily's house to pick out the outfit and accessories in which Emily will be buried, invites a priest, and asks her family members to attend the funeral ceremony. After the funeral, Ruth gathers her three children and explains why Emily Previn's story moved her:

> At first I didn't understand why I was so upset about Emily Previn and then it hit me – I don't want to turn into her. Life is hard enough without not having anyone to help you through it.

Nate tries to console his mother by reminding her that she has her children to keep her company, but she rejects his statement:

> I do not. Nate, you've been walking around here like a zombie for months. David, you've been lying in bed in the middle of the day, God knows why … Claire, I can't even look in your

> direction without have you acting like it's an incredible imposition. All I want is for us to not act like strangers. I want intimacy. Give me intimacy. Won't any of you have intimacy with me?! … I'll just simply wait for it like I have been. I just pray it'll happen before I end up like Emily Previn.

Emily's story is an exemplary narrative of moral panic for Ruth (Cohen, 1972). Emily's presumed lifestyle induces fear within Ruth, urging her to reveal her loneliness to her children, so that she would not 'end up like Emily Previn', a single woman whose death went unnoticed. Her call for attention could represent her loneliness within the family. Even though Ruth is physically surrounded by her children, she is unable to reach them. Having stated this, it is relevant to note that over the course of the episode, all of Ruth's children experience difficulties of their own, with which they cope by themselves. Nate is secretly struggling with a disease that could be fatal; David is a closeted homosexual, trying to overcome a heartbreaking break-up from his longtime boyfriend; and Claire is deliberating over plans for her future after high school. Throughout the entire series, the Fishers struggle with their predicaments and heartaches alone.

The prevailing representations of the Fisher family experiences are imbued with loneliness and sadness. This brings us back to the quote from Simmel's essay, that 'the feeling of isolation is rarely as decisive and intense when one actually finds oneself physically alone … among others at a "party", on a train or in the traffic of a larger city' (Simmel et al., 1997: 119), which could also be extended to the loneliness that may be experienced when one is among one's close family. Meaning, loneliness is not inherently stuck exclusively to loneliness, but could appear in other social forms as well. Moving on to the concluding discussion of this article, we will now highlight how *Six Feet Under* offers what we interpret as a unique and multifaceted reading to singlehood and social emotions.

Discussion

In his classic essay 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', Georg Simmel (1950 [1903]) observed that dissociation is the basic form of urban life of the modern city. The myth making of the lonely death of the old maid, frequently propagated by the media, could also be seen as representing what Simmel had already predicted in 1903. Simmel has suggested that the over-stimulation of the city leads urban dwellers to adopt a blasé attitude while keeping the world at a distance. The issues he raised regarding the detached form of sociality and human destiny are powerfully conveyed through the mediated myth of the lonely single woman. This form of moral panic (Cohen, 1972) also conveys a pessimistic and melancholic view of society and human relations. From this perspective, it could perhaps be argued that the old maid's death and disappearance from public view marks the danger of the anonymous lives in the metropolis without a nuclear family, which in turn replicates the simplistic perception of the family as a haven in a heartless world (Lasch, 1995). However, as Simmel et al. (1997) observed, living in the city also enables experiences of freedom and exercising one's unique individuality. Some of these tensions and dualities are also brought to the fore in the complex script presented in *Six Feet Under*.

The aim of this study is to contribute to a complex and multifaceted understanding of aspects of singlehood, and to the much-required resignification of the cultural politics of emotions conventionally ascribed to this category. Here, we have suggested that loneliness is not a fixed emotion, but a mobile movement across which boundaries are made. In relation to our question of what loneliness *does*, we found that a polysemic analysis of loneliness confounds the neat social binaries of singlehood versus family life or togetherness versus loneliness. Our analysis of an episode of *Six Feet Under* exposed the extent to which loneliness is not treated as a given psychological and private emotion, but rather as a sign that is firmly attached – or *stuck*, paraphrasing Ahmed (2004a, 2008, 2010) – to singlehood. In this vein, our discussion contributes both to the vibrant discussion of social emotions as well as to the growing scholarship about singlehood, with the aim of challenging the limited set of representations of single women and hegemonic ideals of family and solitary life.

While most media texts rigidly identify the lonely spinster as a folk devil (Cohen, 1972), *Six Feet Under* both confirms and defies this myth interchangeably. Rather than merely realigning a narrative of loneliness and fear of the body of the single woman, the episode offers a more open, fluid and unpredictable discursive environment. Thus, for example, Emily's loneliness and misery is only speculated upon rather than confirmed. The various versions and interpretations ascribed to Emily's life demonstrate how *Six Feet Under* vacillates between standardized and novel interpretations of loneliness and aloneness, and as such evinces Fiske's observation about the polysemic nature of televisual texts (1986, 1987). On the one hand, the episode preserves common stereotypes in regard to singlehood – the single woman dies alone and unacknowledged, the aftermath of her death gruesome as ants crawl over her decomposing body and is repetitively attributed with negative qualities. On the other hand, the show offers the possibility that singlehood can be a satisfying option for women.

Female singlehood is on the rise, and as scholarly research shows more women challenge heteronormative schemes which subsume that a woman's happiness could only be realized by becoming a wife and mother. Hopefully some of the options brought about in *Six Feet Under* could be further strengthened and give voice and alternative interpretations to the ways singlehood is perceived in mainstream media culture.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. We address singlehood here not as an essentialist and static category, but a frequently contingent category, planted in social, historical contexts (see Berend, 2000; Holden, 2010; Vicinus, 1988).

2. For instance, in his studies of gay male representations Dustin Bradley Goltz demonstrates that 'the cultural myth of the miserable lonely gay man continues to circulate within mainstream culture' (2009: 7).

References

Ahmed S (2004a) *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Ahmed S (2004b) Affective economies.*Social Text* 22(2): 117–139.

Ahmed S (2008) Social happiness. *Emotion, Space and Society* 1(1): 10–13.

Ahmed S (2010) *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Barbalet J (2002) *Emotion and Sociology*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell.

Berend Z (2000) 'The best of none!' Spinsterhood in nineteenth-century New England.*Journal of Social History* 33(4): 935–957.

Budgeon S (2008) Couple culture and the production of singleness. *Sexualities* 11(3): 301–325.

Burkitt I (1997) Social relationships and emotions. *Sociology* 31(1): 37–55.

Byrne A (2000) Singular identities: Managing stigma, resisting voice. *Women's Studies Review* 7: 13–24.

Byrne A (2003) Developing a sociological model for researching women's self and social identities, *European Journal of Women's Studies* 10(4): 443–464.

Byrne A (2008) Women unbound: Single women in Ireland. In: Yans-McLoughlin V and Bell R (eds) *Women Alone*. New Brunswick, NJ:Rutgers University Press, pp. 29–73.

Byrne A and Carr D (2005) Caught in the cultural lag: The stigma of singlehood. *Psychological Inquiry* 16(2–3): 84–90.

Cobb M (2012) *Single: Arguments for the Uncoupled*. New York: New York University Press.

Cohen S (1972) *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*. London: MacGibbon and Kee.

DePaulo B (2006) *Singled Out: How Singles are Stereotyped, Stigmatized, and Ignored, and Still Live Happily Ever After*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Donovan J (ed.) (1995) *Animals and Women: Feminist Theoretical Explorations*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Douglas M (2003) *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. New York: Routledge.

Elias N (2001). *Loneliness of the Dying*. London: Bloomsbury.

Fairclough N (2003) *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*. New York: Routledge.

Fiske J (1986) Television: Polysemy and popularity. *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 3(4): 391–408.

Fiske J (1987) *Television Culture*. New York: Routledge.

Foucault M (1982) The subject and power. *Critical Inquiry* 8(4): 777–795.

Goffman E (1977) *Relations in Public: Microstudies of the Public Order*. New York: Harper Torchbooks.

Goltz DB (2009) *Queer Temporalities in Gay Male Representation: Tragedy, Normativity, and Futurity*. New York: Routledge.

Gotesky R (1965) Aloneness, loneliness, isolation, solitude. In: Edie J (ed.) *An Invitation to Phenomenology: Studies in the Philosophy of Experience*. Chicago, IL: Quadrangle Books, pp. 221–239.

Graham G and Russell E (2016) Wells woman died alone, and wasn't discovered for 2½ years. *Portland Press Herald*, 13 January. Available at: www.pressherald.com/2016/0/13/police-find-remains-of-wells-woman-who-died-in-her-house-over-2-years-ago/comments/

Hall S (1973) Encoding and decoding in the television discourse. *Education and Culture* 25: 8–14.

Hochschild AR (1983) *The Managed Heart*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Hochschild AR (2003) *The Commercialization of Intimate Life: Notes From Home and Work*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Holden K (2007) *The Shadow of Marriage: Singleness in England.* Manchester: Manchester University Press.
Illouz E (1997) *Consuming the Romantic Utopia: Love and the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
Illouz E (2007) *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity.
Jamieson L and Simpson R (2013) *Living Alone: Globalization, Identity, and Belonging*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
Kemper TD (1978) *A Social Interactional Theory of Emotions*. New York: Wiley.
Kemper TD (1987) How many emotions are there? Wedding the social and the autonomic components. *American Journal of Sociology* 93(2): 263–289.
Klinenberg E (2012) *Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone*. New York: Penguin.
Koch P (1994) *Solitude: A Philosophical Encounter*. Chicago: Open Court.
Lahad K (2012) Singlehood, waiting, and the sociology of time. *Sociological Forum* 27(1): 163–186.
Lahad K (2013) 'Am I asking for too much?' The selective single woman as a new social problem. *Women's Studies International Forum* 40: 23–32.
Lahad K (2014) The single woman's choice as a zero-sum game. *Cultural Studies* 28(2): 240–266.
Lahad K (2016) Stop waiting! Hegemonic and alternative scripts of single women's subjectivity. *Time and Society*. Epub ahead of print 12 April 2016. DOI: 10.1177/0961463X16639324.
Lahad K (2017) *A Table for One: A Critical Reading of Singlehood, Gender and Time*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
Lahad K and Hazan H (2014) The terror of the single old maid: On the insolubility of a cultural category. *Women's Studies International Forum* 47: 127–136.
Lasch C (1995) *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged*. New York: WW Norton.
Lazar MM (2007) Feminist critical discourse analysis: Articulating a feminist discourse praxis 1. *Critical Discourse Studies* 4(2): 141–164.
Long CR and Averill JR (2003) Solitude: An exploration of benefits of being alone. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 33(1): 21–44.
Macvarish J (2006) What is the problem of singleness? *Sociological Research Online* 11(3): 1–14.
Mead M (1980) Loneliness, autonomy and interdependence in cultural context. In: Hartog J, Audy R J and Cohen A (eds) *The Anatomy of Loneliness*. New York: International Universities Press, pp. 394–405.
Morley C (2011) Joyce Carol Vincent: How could this young woman lie dead and undiscovered for almost three years? *The Guardian*, 9 October. Available at: www.theguardian.com/film/2011/oct/09/joyce-vincent-death-mystery-documentary
Peplau LA and Perlman D (1982) Perspectives on loneliness. In: Peplau LA and Perlman D (eds) *Loneliness: A Sourcebook of Current Theory, Research and Therapy*. New York: Wiley, pp. 1–18.
Reynolds J (2013) *The Single Woman: A Discursive Investigation*. London: Routledge.
Reynolds J and Wetherell M (2003) The discursive climate of singleness: The consequences for women's negotiation of a single identity. *Feminism and Psychology* 13(4): 489–510.
Rich A (1980) Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5(4): 631–660.
Rokach A (1990) Surviving and coping with loneliness. *The Journal of Psychology* 124(1): 39–54.

Roseneil S (2007) Queer individualization: The transformation of personal life in the early 21st century. *NORA – Nordic Journal of Women's Studies* 15(2–3): 84–99.
Roseneil S and Budgeon S (2004) Cultures of intimacy and care beyond 'the family': Personal life and social change in the early 21st century. *Current Sociology* 52(2): 135–159.
Simpson R (2006) The intimate relationships of contemporary spinsters. *Sociological Research Online* 11(3).
Simmel G (1950 [1903]) The metropolis and mental life. In: Woolff KH (ed.) *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. New York: The Free Press, pp. 409–424.
Simmel G, Frisby D and Featherstone M (1997) *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*. London: Sage.
Spelman EV (1982) Woman as body: Ancient and contemporary views. *Feminist Studies* 8(1): 109–131.
Sudnow D (1967) *Passing On: The Social Organization of Dying*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
Swidler A (2013) *Talk of Love: How Culture Matters*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Taylor A (2011) *Single Women in Popular Culture: The Limits of Postfeminism*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
Thoits PA (1989) The sociology of emotions. *Annual Review of Sociology* 15: 317–342.
Thoits PA (1990) Emotional deviance: Research agendas. In: Kemper TD (ed.) *Research Agendas in the Sociology of Emotions*. New York: State University of New York Press, pp. 180–203.
Thoits PA (2004) Emotion norms, emotion work, and social order. In: Manstead SR, Frijda N and Fischer A (eds) *Feelings and Emotions: The Amsterdam Symposium*. New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 359–378.
Trimberger EK (2005) *The New Single Woman*. Boston: Beacon Press.
Vicinus M (1988) *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850–1920*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Watson D (2008) Woman sat dead in from of TV for 42 years. *Daily Record*, 27 June. Available at: www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/uk-world-news/woman-sat-dead-front-tv-977414#FoPihCtUXuSIGfzl.97
Weiss RS (1973) *Loneliness: The Experience of Emotional and Social Isolation*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.