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Singlehood, Waiting, and the Sociology of Time[1]

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This article explores how a temporal analysis of singlehood can contribute both to new conceptualizations of singlehood as well as to the study of social time. Prevalent interpretations of waiting single women offer a useful case study as they highlight the temporal organization of social life. Waiting is examined as an interactive setting representing and producing societal symbols, timetables, and collective schedules. Furthermore, this particular form of waiting is mostly featured as an unexpected delay and, accordingly, strengthens the widespread understanding of singlehood as a temporary and transitory life phase. Based on a content analysis, this article seeks to theorize some of the temporal aspects of singlehood, analyze its discursive implications, and study how it reflects and structures dominant discourses of family and social life.

KEY WORDS: family; liminality; singlehood; social time; uncertainty; waiting.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, scholars from various disciplines have contributed to an inspiring collection of works on singlehood and single women. Most of this literature locates singlehood as one of the dimensions of the large-scale structural transition in family life in late-modern societies and centers on exploring the everyday lives of single women and examining some of the stereotypical labeling attached to and experienced by them (Byrne, 2000; Macvarish, 2006; Reynolds, 2008; Trimberger, 2005).

However, a more theoretically oriented study of singlehood is still missing, and the notion of singlehood has only rarely been considered as an analytical concept deserving of sociological attention. The present study seeks to address this shortcoming by attempting to broaden the conceptual framework through which singlehood is customarily grasped and reconsidered.

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In effect, the focus of this research will not be on exploring individual voices and biographical narratives of single women, but on analyzing the discursive formations of singlehood itself (Foucault, 1982). Therefore, singlehood is viewed here as a sociological phenomenon constituted and forged through changing social definitions, norms, and societal expectations. Moreover, this article grasps singlehood not merely as a transitional phase opposed to marriage, but proposes to view it as a key cultural site for understanding some of the taken-for-granted meanings of social life, everyday interactions, and formations of the self.

I suggest that this is one of the reasons why singlehood is sociologically important, as it touches on some of the key questions in sociological thinking, such as patterns of social forms of interaction (Simmel, 1950, 1971), discursive processes of human relations, and some of their sociotemporal rules and modes of governance.

To develop this line of conceptualization, I would like to juxtapose two sociological subfields that are only rarely linked: the sociology of time and the sociological study of singlehood. This article contends that the new currents of research on singlehood can benefit from contemporary discussions of the sociology of time. My argument is that there is an important connection between these fields, as temporality plays a crucial role in the formation of singlehood, while at the same time analyzing singlehood can shed a new light on how temporal orders are constructed and maintained. Indeed, this integration entails the rethinking of categories that set the terms through which singlehood and temporal orders are constituted.

Differently put, the aim of this article is to develop more conceptual tools to study singlehood and to call attention to the possibilities inherent in thinking about singlehood in sociotemporal terms. Additionally, it also claims that the study of singlehood can raise new sociological questions and reconsider some of our taken-for-granted conceptions about social clocks, temporal rhythms, and collective timetables. In that sense, this article makes a significant contribution not only to the social study of singlehood, but also to the social study of time—namely, how time is socially produced, represented, and organized—and to general social thinking.

The sociology of time, with its rich and rapidly growing literature of the past decades, has succeeded in charting how notions of time govern, inform, and interpret social meanings. Nonetheless, although social theorists of time have focused on a variety of issues—among them, for example, social institutions (Zerubavel, 1979, 1981), life course (Elder, 1994), aging and old age (Hazan, 1984, 1994), or family time (Daly, 1996; Gillis, 2001)—research has yet to consider the sociotemporal dimensions of singlehood. In turn, recent studies of singlehood have not taken into account how sociotemporal dimensions constitute—in part—the discursive positioning of single persons, and thus socially construct singlehood. There are two stages to my claim: first, that the sociotemporal perspective provides a new conceptual framework from which singlehood can be theorized and, second, that the study of the

sociotemporal dimensions of singlehood can contribute to research on collective timetables and their attendant hierarchies and power relations.

In pursuit of these ends, this article shall focus on a detailed exploration of the ways in which the temporal construct of "waiting" constitutes singlehood and prevalent images of single women. As this study will demonstrate, the collective image of single women, waiting to enter couplehood and married life, is deeply embedded in both Anglo-American societies and Israeli-Jewish culture. Indeed, in our era of transnational, globalized media markets, one can easily recognize the manner in which these images circulate, as well as how those global representations fabricate and construe singlehood in contemporary cultures.

Moreover, the analytical perspective offered here views both "singlehood" and "waiting" not merely as individually related experiences, but as collective and relational constructs. In fact, academic and public discourse on family and singlehood often tends to cluster together different forms of nonmarriage. Indeed, widowhood, divorce, and single parenthood are sometimes all conceptualized under the general umbrella of singlehood. There are undoubtedly many shared discursive patterns binding these categories together, yet some of the fundamental disparities between them are regularly overlooked. That is, singlehood, in and of itself, is far more diverse in nature than its conventional representations; it varies, for example, by gender, age, class, religion, and ethnicity.

Furthermore, the growing rate of cohabitation and LAT (living alone together) households should inspire us to redefine our conception of singlehood so that it denotes not only nonmarried but also noncoupled individuals. A more nuanced definition as well as theoretically relevant distinctions are required. In the present study, I define prolonged singlehood in relation to women who are not engaged in a committed long-term relationship and do not have children. It is important to stress, then, that this definition does not include the social categories of single mothers, divorcees, or widows, nor does it include women who share their lives with a permanent partner.

The construct of waiting also emerges as a relational sociological phenomenon. Waiting is often associated with fear and anxieties about the future, yet it can also be a time of anticipation, hope, and excitement. Hence, waiting has multiple facets: it can be tranquil or anxious, patient or impatient, a waste of time or an important and meaningful interval in our lives. In that sense, the present study seeks to shed light on the ascribed meaning of waiting, which, as will subsequently be stressed, is not an unconditional phenomenon but contingent on collective timetables and changing discursive understandings.

Additionally, the extent to which waiting is a gendered social phenomenon cannot be underestimated. In that sense, waiting entails gender-related differences and age-/sex-related role transitions that, in turn, form different temporal regimes and timetables. With this in mind, and due to the fact that this is not a comparatively based article, I have chosen to focus here solely on images of single women's lives and not to study these images concerning single

men. This is largely due to three reasons. First, the social representation of waiting to be married is still more visible when it concerns women. Second, the waiting experiences of single women are juxtaposed with widespread images of women as passively waiting and men as vigorously acting. Third, the pressure of biological clocks and the threat of becoming an "old maid" formulate different modes of temporal discourse. Therefore, and due also to the fact that singlehood and time are contingent on gendered perceptions, this article will focus on the temporal representations of single women.

In what follows, I seek to trace some of the discursive constructions of waiting and images of waiting single women and, by proxy, problematize these concepts. I suggest that a more nuanced understanding of waiting, as a discursively constructed formation (Foucault, 1982) and social form (Simmel, 2009), can lend us a unique analytical perspective from which the wider discursive formation of singlehood as a sociotemporal category can be explored. This point will be further developed in the next section, which discusses the methodological considerations and challenges underlying this article.

BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

In the last decade, a wide variety of Internet portals, blogs, and forums have shown growing interest in single women's lives and singlehood in general. At the same time, popular culture worldwide continues to produce box office hits and popular television series about singlehood and single women (e.g., *Sex and the City*, *The Bachelorette*, and the *Bridget Jones* film series). In effect, this globally mass-mediated imagery has changed the creation and circulation of discursive constructions of singlehood. In this context, the selection of data for this study stems from the contention that popular culture, everyday talk, and new media technologies effect, sustain, and alter deeply ingrained understandings through which singlehood is constituted and formed nowadays.[3] As such, the various texts under examination are viewed as cultural sites in which the discursive construction of the sociotemporal aspects of singlehood are reflected and produced.

The methodology and choice of materials is closely linked to these rapidly changing social realities. I am particularly interested in the production of preexisting meanings, social truths, and the discursive means through which singlehood is constituted, represented, and interpreted. Differently put, this study is attuned both to local-global discursive formations as well as to the old-new contexts that constitute and represent contemporary understandings of singlehood, waiting, and social time.

Most sociological work on singlehood focuses today on in-depth interviews (see, e.g., Budgeon, 2008; Byrne, 2000; Macvarish, 2006; Reynolds,

[3] These observations also rely on a rich and varied scholarship on popular culture, which views it as not only a key site for formation of identities and everyday realties, but also an arena in which consent and resistance are intertwined. For more, see Hall (1992) and Illouz (2007).

2008; Simpson, 2003, 2006; Trimberger, 2005); however, the present study seeks to add to the existing literature on singlehood and social time by incorporating these new global shifts and translating them to new research questions. This is why the methods employed here provide some unique advantages and hopefully contribute to the development of studies of both singlehood and social time.

This article forms part of a more extensive study on the discursive construction of singlehood. It employs a qualitative content-analysis-based approach to explore relevant themes that link the discursive categories of singlehood and waiting. My choice of Internet columns written by and about single women, clichés, and songs is related to my contention that these sites convey deeply ingrained sociotemporal norms with which the cultural tag of singlehood and representations of single women can be further interpreted.

Given this approach, these texts are viewed as discursive formations constituting a cultural space for interpretation and debate. The columns chosen for analysis were selected from a large variety of texts published during 2006–2009 in *Ynet,* which is considered to be Israel's leading Internet portal. The texts selected for analysis were carefully chosen from a subsection in *Ynet* entitled "Relationships" (*Yachasim*), which itself consists of various subsections like "dating," "getting married," "couples," "pride" (gay and lesbian), and "sexuality," alongside personal and advice columns. It should be stressed that the *relationship* section forms part of a flourishing local and global Internet environment interested in exploring issues such as marriage, love, and singlehood, which I believe holds much potential for further sociotemporal interpretation of these themes.

This study joins current research on the Internet, which covers a rapidly growing range of issues and social conditions such as online networking and interaction, cyber cultural identities, social and political action on the Internet, digital subculture, and more.[4] However, as opposed to this newly developing literature, this research views the *Ynet* columns as cultural artifacts, producing and reflecting discursive practices.

In this article, I also refer to two popular songs, "The Man I Love" and "Eleanor Rigby," as I consider them to be potent texts, recognized worldwide (including in Israel) and representing two different formulas of waiting. My view of songs as important cultural texts is consonant with social research about love songs, which views them as important signposts of cultural development (Kalof, 1993) and intensely powerful and rich mythological nuggets, as Crystal Kile (1992) suggests. Based on works from the sociology of culture (Illouz, 1997, 2003; Swidler, 2001), cultural studies, and popular culture (Denzin, 1991; Fiske, 1989), I seek to understand how stories of singlehood

[4] A growing body of literature addresses the social impact of network societies. Different works examine online forums, blogs, chat rooms, dating websites, and also meta-questions about cyber culture such as current relations between science, technology, and culture, the future of virtual communities, and more. See, for example, Bell (2001) and Bell and Kennedy (2004) on cyberspace culture, and Eysenbach et al. (2004) and Rier (2007) on online support groups.

are propagated through public images, popular songs, Internet columns, and clichés and in effect shape popular understandings of singlehood and its temporal positions.

Moreover, throughout this study, I also refer to clichés about singlehood and single women that are prevalent in Anglo-American and Israeli societies, finding expression in everyday talk and mundane social interactions. My point of departure for the analysis of clichés builds on sociologist Anton Zijderveld's (1979) characterization of this phenomenon. For Zijderveld, clichés are containers of past experiences and at the same time have come to provide modern humans with some degree of certainty, clarity, and stability. To be more specific, they are "handed over from one generation to another while the individual adjusts to them by learning to use them in daily social life" (Zijderveld, 1979:16). It is also important to note, as Zijderveld elaborates, that clichés are not merely overused, worn-out statements and sentences. They not only stand in the background of social interaction, but also "bring people unobtrusively into a certain mood. They mould their mentality and attitude, and thus gradually prepare them to speak, to think, to feel and act in a specific direction. This direction is not clearly indicated by the cliché but by the wider semantic context in which it is used" (Zijderveld, 1979:13).

Following this line of analysis, the clichés about singlehood, I argue, are discursive constructs[5] that demonstrate the continuity of traditional patterns of thought while attempting to cope with new social realities. In that sense, the analysis of clichés enables us to bring to light some of the deeply rooted assumptions concerning the dominant hegemonic social orders. It should be stressed that the clichés analyzed in this article in Hebrew have different versions and translations in Anglo-American cultures and vice versa.

Additionally, my research methods owe much to the works of Foucault and Simmel. This combination is not common, and it enables me to view the texts as actually constructing, and not just reflecting, reality. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault famously defined discourse as: "A group of statements in so far as they belong to the same discursive formation … It is made up of a limited number of statements for which a group of conditions of existence can be defined" (Foucault, 1982:117) In his interpretation of Foucault, Stuart Hall views discourse as "a group of statements; i.e. a way of representing a particular kind of knowledge about a topic" (Hall, 1992:290).

Pursuant to these Foucauldian orientations, the methodologies and queries underlying this research are aimed at understanding the discourse of singlehood by viewing the phenomenon as a discursive formation. In doing so, I consider singlehood a clearly bounded form of social knowledge and examine it as a cultural site at which varied contemporary discourses gather.

[5] Recent years have seen a flourishing of research employing discourse analysis. Discourse analysis methods offer different modes of social inquiry for disciplines ranging from linguistics and psychology to literary studies and media and sociology, to name a few. Nonetheless, the only discourse analysis study on singlehood I am aware of is by Reynolds (Reynolds, 2008), in which she develops a synthetic approach, integrating Foucauldian and conversation analysis methods.

In effect, I look at the discourse of singlehood primarily as a constitutive force and as a discursive formation. Foucault's writings have encouraged me to further explore essentialist, "natural," and "objective" social truths about single women's lives, the temporality of their situation, and singlehood in general. Moreover, Foucault's work on discursive formations has enabled me to explore some of the conceptual definitions that both delimit and define what we are able to say and represent with regard to singlehood and social constructions of time (Foucault, 1982).

It should be noted that most of these constructed meanings have normalizing effects, as they establish fictions of truth that appear natural and unquestionable. As Foucault explains:

> We must grasp this statement in the exact specificity of its occurrences, determine its conditions of existence, fix at least its limits, establish its correlations with other statements that may be connected with it and show what other forms of statements it excludes. (Foucault 1982:144)

As for Simmel's methodological influence, the Simmelian outlook encourages us to remain attentive to the ways in which single persons and singlehood in itself are *formed through interaction* and in themselves can be regarded as a *specific form of interaction* (Simmel, 1950, 1971). For Simmel, our social world is made up of such social forms as were brought into existence in order to establish a connection between varied contents. Social forms enable us to materialize our social world, while constituting and responding to the allegedly fixed forms of social life. However, as Simmel further emphasizes, social forms are not fixed and stable, but fluid and liable to change. Thus, the social form is the shape into which the interaction is molded (Simmel, 1950, 1971).

In this light, it is important to note that as opposed to most scholarly literature on singlehood, I do not focus on the everyday lives of single women and men but, following the work of Haim Hazan, I also observe single women as carriers of *the cultural tags of singlehood* as produced by varying social forces (Hazan, 2002). Furthermore, building on Simmel's modes of analysis, I contend that single women or, more precisely, images of single women as they emerge from the texts analyzed, can be perceived as a social type. This view encourages us to further explore how singlehood emerges as a social status when society assigns it to specific persons. Additionally, one of the attributes of singlehood as a social form is waiting as a specific form of social interaction, contingent on variables such as age and gender and based, as will be shown, on status distinctions between single and nonsingle persons.

Further, while prevalent social norms construct singlehood as an essential status, this study views singlehood as a relational category generating and reflecting widespread understandings of social relations and social identities. According to this view, singlehood is not grasped as an objectively given social category, but is configured as a dynamic and symbolic representation dependent on specific social interactions and cultural discourses.

FAMILISM AND SINGLEHOOD

An impressive body of research is fascinated by recent changes in family structure, what has often been termed as ''post-modern families,'' ''brave new families'' (Stacey, 1990), or what Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim has defined as the ''post familial family'' (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). These terms refer to major social phenomena such as the increasing rates of singlehood, cohabitation, divorce, and remarriage, as well as the spread of nonheterosexual families and single parenthood. Judith Stacey considers these brave new families to be emblematic of the postmodern condition, expressing the increasing conditions of diversity and flux characterizing new contemporary kinship and gender arrangements (Stacey, 1990). Responding to this confusion, Elizabeth Beck-Gernsheim and Ulrich Beck ask:

> Ask yourself what actually is a family nowadays? What does it mean? … Families can be constellations of very different relationships. . . .We are getting into optional relationships inside families which are very difficult to identify in an objective empirical way because they are a matter of subjective perspectives and decisions. (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002:204)

A similar set of questions preoccupies Israeli scholars. Recent studies of Israeli families have also emphasized the profound changes in Israeli family structure. Nonetheless, these findings demonstrate that society is not simply moving in one direction. Israeli sociologists such as Sylvia Fogel Bigoui and Larisa Remenick write that in Israel, family and marriage still play a pivotal role in forming the identities of Israeli women (Fogiel-Bijaoui, 1999; Remenick, 2006). The family-centered order of Israeli society is manifested, for example, in welfare policies, family allowances, and generous state funding for infertility treatment technologies (Portugese, 2003).

For Jacqueline Portugese, the signs of Israeli familism are easily detectable: Israeli women marry relatively earlier, bear more children, and divorce less than their Western counterparts (Portugese, 1998:62). The centrality of family in Israeli society today is also reflected in findings emerging from an impressive body of scholarly writings that have examined Israel's pro-natalist ideology and policy.[6] Israel, as depicted in these studies, is one of the leading countries supporting and developing high-technology fertility treatments. The dominance of the familistic ideology in Israeli society is also reflected in a recent body of works about single women.

The significance of family in Israeli society is also reflected in Daphna Hacker's and Inbal Yagan's works on Israeli single women. While Hacker has explored the legal status of and legislative attitudes toward Israeli single women (Hacker, 2001, 2005), Yagan's work touches on the illegitimate status of single women in Israeli society and the various mechanisms through which they attempt to regain social legitimacy and status for themselves (Yagan,

[6] See, for example, Amir and Benjamin (1997), Berkovich (1997), Donath (2007), Shalev and Gooldin (2006), Hashiloni-Dolev (2007), Kahn (2000), Melamed (2002), and Remenick (2006).

1997). Hacker and Yagan both emphasize that singlehood in Israel is still far from a legitimate category and is subject to pity, scorn, and stereotypical attitudes. Overall, the research in Israel on singlehood has also relied mostly on qualitative methods based on in-depth interviews with single women (Sa'ar, 2001, 2004; Schwartz, 2008; Yagan, 1997). In what follows, I propose to explore singlehood through the different prism of a relatively new subdiscipline in sociology, namely, the study of social time.

WAITING AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF TIME

My first encounter with the sociology of time evolved, interestingly enough, from an attempt to assemble different kinds of clichés ascribed to singlehood. In the process, I could not help but notice that one of the salient aspects of those clichés was time. ''In the end she'll die alone'' and ''what is she waiting for?'' were among my first points of departure.

Moreover, one oft-heard comment was that the single woman is about to ''miss her train,'' or that she is ''wasting her time.'' The single woman is constantly being asked whether she is ''still single,'' or being bid to get married next or soon. Still, soon, ever-after, waste of time, waiting, how long, when—these all form part of the rich language of time. Sociologist Alberto Melucci claims that we all have a spontaneous idea of what we mean when we talk about time, as our notion of time is immediate and intuitive.

> Even when we understand immediately what we are talking about, we find it extremely hard to pin down what the experience of time actually means … in more ancient culture reference to time only conjured up a divine image—often a river god or another aquatic deity which, in the image of the flow, reflects the appearance and disappearance of things … the experience of time is characterized by a sense of thickness and a density that our definitions seldom provide and which, perhaps for this reason, cultures have sought to convey through the metaphor and myth. (Melucci, 1996:7)

Indeed, we often neglect to acknowledge that time is a man-made notion denoting and bestowing meaning on our daily lives. As Durkheim already pointed out, ''the calendar expresses the rhythm of collective activities, while at the same time its function is to assure their regularity'' (Durkheim, 1961:11).

Sociologists such as Norbert Elias and Eviatar Zerubavel have studied how the invention of the clock and the calendar have facilitated everyday existence and acquired central authority in our lives (Elias, 1993; Zerubavel, 1977). These devices endow society with different rhythms and measurements by dividing time into minutes, hours, days, weeks, and years. In this sense, anthropologist Edmund Leach has clarified that the regularity of time is not an intrinsic part of nature, but a man-made notion that we have projected onto our environment for our own particular purposes (Leach, 1971:133). By the same token, Zerubavel has stated that given its considerable temporal regularity, our social environment can easily function as the most reliable clock or calendar (Zerubavel, 1985:14).

This perspective, I suggest, can assist us in rethinking the culturally constructed notion of waiting and how it is inextricably interwoven with the temporal regulation of social life in all its complexity. Waiting is a relational category dependent on diverse social contexts and circumstances. Yet, following Simmel's formulation of social forms (Simmel, 1950, 1971), waiting also emerges as a patterned and repetitive form of interaction. Indeed, we wait in waiting rooms, we stand in lines, and we enroll ourselves on waiting lists. Waiting is a significant part of our social lives and everyday schedules; it is an inherent side effect of bureaucratic logic and religious beliefs, and is incorporated into a wide variety of social practices. It also plays a central role in our daily social existence and knowledge, as it guides everything from mundane conversation to traffic rules.

The play *Waiting for Godot* has famously emphasized how fundamentally intrinsic waiting is to the human condition. Waiting, adds Giovanni Gasparini, has a wide range of meanings and attributes and is commonly considered a basic aspect of the human experience. Waiting moves, he observes, from representing a hope and a gratifying experience to a frustration, an illusion, and a form of indefinite distress (Gasparini, 1995:39).

Thomas Morrow suggests that waiting casts life into a "little dungeon of time" (Morrow, 1984). In Western capitalist societies, waiting time to a large extent has pejorative connotations, partly because capitalist society also idealizes notions of efficiency and speed and identifies time with money and, thus, waiting with idleness or waste. One often seeks to minimize waiting time or to eliminate it altogether. Accordingly, waiting is associated with bad service and inefficiency. As a result, today much technological and organizational effort is invested in seeking to reduce waiting time.

In this context, initiatives are undertaken to transform waiting time into valuable or entertaining time. Waiting time, as Zerubavel writes, is often socially interpreted as "killing time."

> Many people today are becoming specialists in the fairly sophisticated art of "killing time," which involves filling otherwise "empty" unaccounted-for time. (Zerubavel, 1981:58)

Obviously, attempts to "kill time" reflect the fact that waiting time is conceptualized as a waste of time. Such successful attempts not only attest to the successful time-management skills of the individual, but also can possibly endow that person with a sense of control and self-agency.

The relational category of waiting also reopens the relations between power and knowledge and the manner in which waiting in itself is related to wider sets of power relations. Within this framework, sociologist Barry Schwartz has attempted to explore the ways access to waiting is distributed throughout the social structure. "The distribution of waiting time coincides with the distribution of power," he argues (Schwartz, 1975:5). Waiting mirrors temporal power relations: there are those who wait and those who are waited for. According to Schwartz, to be kept waiting is a social assertion that one's

time and social worth are less valuable (Schwartz, 1975). Javier Auyero, in an ethnographic study of waiting practices in a waiting room at a welfare office at Buenos Aires, contends that waiting manufactures subjects who have no choice but to comply with the waiting practices imposed by state bureaucracy (Auyero, 2010).

As such, waiting is regarded as a subordination of one's own schedule to others: the employee waits for his or her employer, the patient waits for the doctor, and the detainee for the judge. Following Schwartz's and Auyero's understandings of the temporal distribution of power, we can turn to the well-known fact that the privileged do not stand in line. They are either diverted to the beginning of the line or their waiting time is waived altogether. As Leon Mann notes, queuing is associated with less privileged groups in society, as their time is considered less valuable (Mann, 1969). From this it follows that to enforce a waiting period is to exert power, and hence to wait is to be powerless (Schwartz, 1975). Thinking about waiting and singlehood as social forms and interactional processes also sheds light on how power relations, forms of knowledge, and subjectivities are constituted and reified. In what follows, I seek to explore this analytical terrain and incorporate some of these understandings into the study of singlehood and social time.

Someday He'll Come Along, or Not

Noga Amit, a single woman writing for *Ynet*, makes the following observation:

> The prevailing cliché holds that every woman anticipates her wedding day. She visualizes her wedding gown down to the smallest detail and at the age of seven she already knows what the color of the napkins will be.[7]

Indeed, waiting in its romantic formulation is built into our notions of romantic longing, as expressed beautifully in a verse from the following classic love song (also popular in Israel) written by Ira Gershwin and preformed by singers such as Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald.

> Someday he'll come along
> The man I love
> And he'll be big and strong
> The man I love
> And when he comes my way
> I'll do my best to make him stay

Waiting for him "to come along" and "making him stay" complement the cultural image of a "Prince Charming" or the "knight in shining armor." However, it should be stressed that waiting emerges here again as a relational phenomenon, contingent on belonging to different age groups and different

[7] Amit (2006).

discursive factors. A different interpretation of waiting is depicted in another well-known verse from the song ''Eleanor Rigby,'' written by Paul McCartney and performed by the Beatles.

> Ah, look at all the lonely people
> Ah, look at all the lonely people
> Eleanor Rigby picks up the rice in the church where a wedding has been
> Lives in a dream
> Waits at the window, wearing the face that she keeps in a jar by the door
> Who is it for?

For Eleanor Rigby, there is no point in waiting. The rice thrown by the happy couple remains on the floor, a reminder to all those lagging behind. Eleanor Rigby can be interpreted as not only a song about unrealized romance, but also a representation of the overly prolonged wait and eventual lonely death of an aging spinster.

Both songs depict the existential condition of waiting for the unknown. Each expresses a longing for an unidentified male savior. Both subjects wait for a ''necessary'' transformation in their lifecourse that has yet to occur. However, a comparison of the two songs demonstrates how waiting is dependent on differing situational contexts and temporal timetables. While the first is considered to be one of the most legendary love songs of the twentieth century, portraying an image of romantic longing, the other is a noted song about loneliness, illustrating a desperate, pathetic waiting. The woman represented in ''some day he'll come along'' is ''on time,'' while the figure of Eleanor Rigby can be perceived as ''off time.''

The two images of single women waiting for men in these two songs—well-known in Israel and worldwide—reflect deeply ingrained representations of singlehood and single women at different stages of what Roth terms ''career timetables.'' In his well-known study *Timetables: Structuring the Passage of Time in Hospital Treatment and Other Careers,* Roth claims:

> When many people go through the same series of events, we speak of this as a career and of the sequence and timing of events as their career timetable. (Roth, 1963:93)

These patterned timetables and pathways are also to be found in the cultural image of the bridesmaid. In popular culture, the bridesmaid is a recognizable social figure perceived to be ''the next in line'' to her marrying friend. The bridesmaid is usually a single woman assigned the role of supporting the bride before and during the ceremony. Popular culture worldwide is fascinated by this figure and the bridesmaid's role is especially popular in some of Hollywood's romantic comedies. One example is Anne Fletcher's box office hit, *27 Dresses,* which depicts the story of a serial bridesmaid who already has 27 bridesmaid's dresses in her closet, yet is still waiting for her own wedding to arrive.

Anglo-American clichés such as ''always a bridesmaid, never the bride'' or ''three times a bridesmaid, never a bride'' exemplify social conventions that

mark the overly extended presence of the bridesmaid as disruptive to the collective temporal order. In Israeli secular and religious marriage culture, the bridesmaid's role is less structured and visible than in Christian weddings. Nevertheless, the presence of one's best friend, sister, or cousin is a recognized informal social role in Jewish-Israeli weddings and has many parallels to the social role of the bridesmaid. An abundance of texts appearing in *Ynet*'s relationship section portraying the bride's unmarried sister, cousin, or best friend express the unease, embarrassment, and, at times, even humiliation associated with attending a wedding when one is still placed in the position of the "yet-to-be" married sister or friend.

The prototype of the bridesmaid not only embodies the waiting experience, but also emphasizes a sociotemporal social order in which an imaginary symbolic queue is formed. This informal scheme is embedded within prevailing expectations of "who should be next." In that respect, an "eternal bridesmaid" not only signifies some form of bad timing, but also represents a disruption of common temporal norms and codes. The extent to which this form of temporal organization creates and maintains hierarchical relations within the matrix of power relations between single and nonsingle persons cannot be underestimated.

In a similar vein, Moore stresses the importance of defining the collective temporal boundaries and the orderly arrangements for synchronization in our everyday lives (Moore, 1963:52). Indeed, as these clichés imply, playing the role of the bridesmaid for too long disrupts sequential and synchronized temporal orders. The social sanction needs no further elaboration: "always a bridesmaid, never the bride."

Nevertheless, whether a single woman is occupying the temporary role of bridesmaid or being bid by well-wishers to get married soon, the underlying assumption is that she is "still in the game" and has a chance if she is able to "catch the bouquet in time." To catch it, single women are expected to gather together and even playfully compete with one another to maximize their chances of catching the bouquet this time. The folkloristic ritual of catching the bouquet can therefore signify a social event that conveys a particular temporal map, in Zerubavel's terms, a map that reflects prevailing temporal expectations in respect to the anticipated sequential temporal order (Zerubavel, 1985:14).

Indeed, one cannot ignore the fact that these chances are structured within collective age norms and timetables. The idea of a bridesmaid above a certain age strikes one as unreasonable, and wishing such a person to marry next would seem inappropriate. Interestingly, the role of the "best man" entails no such temporal patterns and expectations nor does he participate in any "waiting rituals."

The variable nature of waiting is also displayed in the well-known Israeli blessing, *Bekarov Ezlech!* (soon at yours!). When addressed to single men and women, it is a blessing usually conveyed by the married to the nonmarried, most often at weddings, and it expresses a hope that the next wedding will be

theirs. The tone of this blessing is commonly confident and affirmative. In the case of single persons, the *Bekarov Ezlech* wish does not specify to whom one should be married, but refers to the act and the event itself. As Goldy Heart, one of the regular single-woman columnists writing for *Ynet*, poignantly observes:

> Every single man and woman knows that one cannot escape the *Bekarov Ezlech* blessing … nevertheless I want to ask why these aunts, who in certain cases have not seen me since my Bat Mitzvah, think they know what I want in my life right now … To be honest, I don't know if this blessing is intended for me or for the aunts themselves.[8]

Hence, the single woman is not necessarily waiting for someone specific; rather, her wait marks a climb up a linear ladder, whereby she can stop lagging behind and comply with norms that construe collective timetables, in Roth's terms (Roth, 1963), and indicate one's movement through time.

Waiting to be next, then, is far from a personal endeavor; indeed, the blessing itself goes on to describe single women's wait as a collective waiting project. These social pressures are apparent in both the U.S. and Israeli clichés; *Bekaorov Ezlech* and *always a bridesmaid* reflect what is reformulated again and again as a social problem: extended singlehood. Another manifestation of the collective wait appears in the next *Ynet* excerpt, in which the single woman describes her mother as

> waiting for the moment when I will tell her that I found him. Without me saying it didn't work; just telling her simply that I found true love.[9]

In another *Ynet* column, Inbal, a single woman, depicts the collective wait from a different perspective.

> I have decided that until I have a steady partner to show up with to Friday dinners, I'm not getting near my family's house. Although they don't ask, I can see the question marks flickering in their eyes: "Well? When? You are almost thirty-seven!"[10]

Roth has also described how people constantly try to define when things will happen to them and measure their progress according to temporal norms and benchmarks (Roth, 1963). In the same context, the single woman's parents are waiting with her; all they want is *Ktzat Nachat* (a modest amount of joy and contentment). These clichés are also enmeshed with what Merav Amir (Amir, 2007) refers to as contemporary representations of the biological clock, which position women at a relative disadvantage in comparison to their male counterparts. The clock is ticking and single women's lives, as Amir argues, do not always coincide with the natural laws of women bodies (Amir, 2007). The threat hovering over single women is that they will overly extend their wait and thereby miss the train altogether, with no hope of rejoining the linear path.

[8] Heart (2008).
[9] Hen Bath (2009).
[10] Inbal (2008).

WAITING AS A LIMINAL CONDITION

Waiting is also a source of suspense because of its liminal attributes. In his widely quoted study on the ritual process, Victor Turner (Turner, 1969) argued that the liminal intermediate phase is of fundamental sociological importance. Drawing on Arnold Van Gennep's theory of the three stages of rites of passage,[11] Turner paid particular attention to the second stage, the liminal phase. Liminality, he emphasized, is a state of being between phases; a transitory position. As such, the individual positioned in the liminal phase is not a member of the group one previously belonged to, nor of the group one will belong to upon the completion of the next rite. In fact, liminal subjects are "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony" (Turner, 1969:95).

The widespread images of anxiously waiting single women could be grasped as liminars, in Turner's terms (Turner, 1969). This understanding corresponds closely with my contention that singlehood is generally framed as a liminal, temporary state; a transitory stage on the way to couplehood and family life. According to prevalent representations, the single, not yet married woman is depicted as waiting, hoping, speculating as to when the liminal period will come to an end. This familiar image is implicit in the following *Ynet* column.

> Where would I meet him? How would it happen? I couldn't let myself believe that I would find him. How could I be optimistic when I had no clue as to the outcome of my search? One of my friends told me that perhaps instead of thinking about how that I should think about when … he's out there you don't know exactly where … the only question is when you will meet him and not if you will meet him … it's just a question of time …[12]

In the above passage, Tali Netz, a single woman, stresses her liminal and uncertain social position. The liminal stage, as Turner notes, is characterized by ambiguity and inversion resulting from an anomaly wherein people slip through networks of classification (Turner, 1969). While marriage is commonly regarded as a charted and planned passage, permanent or prolonged singlehood is often viewed as an emergent, unplanned life trajectory. Of course, I am not suggesting here that couplehood or married life is an automatic or unambiguous process. My point here is that exiting "normative singlehood" and entering the late singlehood stage often lacks the structured expectations, rites of passage, and institutionalized socialization processes associated, for example, with moving in together, getting married, or having children.

[11] According to Van Gennep, the first stage—the preliminal—is a state of separation, of detachment from society's structure or from relatively stable cultural conditions. The second—the liminal—is the interstitial phase or the margin, and the third—the postliminal—entails the reentering of the social structure.

[12] Netz (2008).

As Tali Netz writes, "it's just a question of time." However, clear temporal references are missing and the exact timing of progress from one temporal position to another is not specified. The experience of waiting becomes ever more intolerable for some of the single women, as the status of the single can change the next day, in a few years, or never at all, as another single woman writing for *Ynet* observes:

> I am thirty years old, six years past the age I was supposed to be married, and there is no potential groom on the horizon …[13]

This position can also be perceived, then, as a body of clues, constructing the norms of collective timetables (Roth, 1963). Indeed, at some vague and unstructured point in time, singlehood shifts from being a socially legitimate temporary phase to what can be characterized as a biographical and social disruption (Bury, 1982). Put differently, lifelong singlehood marks an unexpected disruption of a seemingly normative liminal state that has unexpectedly become permanent. Thus, this social representation of the symbolic wait is interwoven with the wish to leave the liminal territory of uncertainty and vagueness and enter a nonliminal state.

The notion of liminality also sheds light on the widespread perception of singlehood as a transitory phase, waiting for the transition that has yet to occur. Single women are constantly being asked: What's going on? What's new? Any news? In the same context, an abundance of visual images depict the single woman as waiting for a telephone call, for a sign, for "Mr. Right," or to catch the bouquet on time.

From this perspective, singlehood enhances and even reinforces the highly structured and seemingly permanent and secure status of conjugal and family life. Before moving on to analyze the uncertain conditions embedded within this form of waiting, it is important to note that this liminal form of waiting is also dependent on one's age. My contention is that singlehood is constituted differently at 25, 35, and 45. As noted earlier, if at the earlier stages of the single woman's career waiting can be construed as romantic and a positive tension-builder, as singlehood threatens to turn into a permanent status, waiting can become imbued with dread, fear, and uncertainty.

PROLONGED LIMINALITY AND UNCERTAINTY

Waiting is also dependent on the possibilities of mastering the unknown. Auyero, for example, has documented the relations between waiting and uncertainty experienced by welfare recipients who endure the endless arbitrary postponements, bureaucratic mistakes, and changing state requirements. "In the recursive interactions with the state, poor people learn that they have to remain temporarily neglected, unattended to, or postponed (Auyero, 2010:857).

[13] Dazy (2009).

Julius Roth offers us an additional perspective on the relations between waiting and uncertainty. In his observations of the temporal experiences of patients in a hospital, he was particularly interested in how the structure of time imposes certainty and predictability on the trajectories of the hospitalized.

> One way to structure uncertainty is to structure the time period through which uncertain events occur. Such a structure must usually be developed from information gathered from the experience of others who have gone or are going through the same series of events. As a result of comparisons, norms develop for the entire group about when certain events may be expected to occur. When many people go through the same series of events we speak of this as a career, and of the sequence and timing of events as a career timetable. (Roth, 1963:136)

Roth's evaluation can also be applied to the *Bekarov Ezlech* blessing. The social knowledge conveyed here is embedded in collective temporal benchmarks and signposts. Thus, the blessing lays emphasis on the manner in which our social life is constantly organized and regulated by temporal schedules and temporal boundaries. In this case, the career timetable of the single woman is prescribed in advance, and social injunctions therefore spur her on to move forward in a predefined and recognized linear trajectory.

Nonetheless, the incorporation or reincorporation of single women into society marked by finding one's soulmate and building a family may or may not happen. Indeed, prolonged singlehood is regularly represented as a period of growing uncertainty and instability. These clichés therefore provide important signposts and, in this case, structure and bestow meaning on the passage of time. By the same token, anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano has observed that waiting implies a particular orientation in time, directed toward the future; nonetheless, it is a constricted orientation that closes in on the present.

> In waiting, the present is always secondary to the future. It is held in expectation. It is filled with suspense. It is a sort of a holding action … in waiting the present loses its focus in the now. The world in its immediacy slips away, it is derealized. It is without élan, vitality, creative force. It is numb, muted, dead. It's only meaning lies in the future—in the arrival or the non-arrival of the object of waiting. (Crapanzano, 1985:44)

Crapanzano notes that in English one cannot distinguish between waiting for something concrete and waiting for anything to happen: "in waiting for something, anything to happen, the object of the intentional act of waiting, like the object of anxiety, is not given" (Crapanzano, 1985: 46).

Given the above analysis, I suggest that singlehood as a prolonged or permanent liminal status differs from other liminal phases due to a fundamental vagueness as to its end point. Think, for example, of a Ph.D. candidate submitting a request for a scholarship. One generally knows when one can expect an answer and can plan ahead accordingly. On the other hand, the temporal location of the single woman is uncertain; she cannot determine how soon she will arrive at the end of her wait. As opposed to Turner's conceptualization of liminality, in which one stands between two clearly defined stages of

separation and reaggregation, the exact point of reaggregation is this case remains largely unknown.

As columnist Goldy Heart writes, in response to her aunts' repeated blessings of *Bekarov Ezlech*:

> Do these people have a special calendar from which they know the specific date that Goldy Heart will marry? Just tell me; I promise not to get mad if they do. It seems to me that these kinds of calendars and crystal balls only exist in Harry Potter films, and so these kinds of blessings are particularly annoying. They attempt to promise something which is beyond the control of the person who is blessing me. Can you promise me a specific date? If so, then fine; promise. *Bekarov Ezlech* is simply not good enough.[14]

Bekarov Ezlech is indubitably an attempt to structure the state of uncertainty. This interesting column not only lucidly reflects the powerful effect of clichés and the gap between their underlying cultural assumptions and everyday experiences (Fiske, 1989), but also emphasizes the implications of this uncertainty embedded in a particular kind of restless waiting. Following Roth, *Bekarov Ezlech* can be perceived as a very broad category in ways similar to his description of tuberculosis patients, who have no precise marking as to the date of their discharge (Roth, 1963).

Returning to Goldy Heart's column, in this respect, her aunts' promise is beyond their control and predictive powers. In other words, although the tone of the blessing may sound affirmative and confident, it is also dependent on a twist of fate and the unknown. There are no manageable temporal benchmarks (Roth, 1963) that can foretell the end of the wait.

Moreover, this social interaction, this lineup of both the bridesmaids and the single women given the *Bekarov Ezlech* blessing, forms, I argue, a *symbolic queue* enmeshed with disciplinary power relations and forms of control. From this standpoint, when one hopes for single women to soon be married (the *Bekarov Ezlech* blessing), this expectancy forms part of a normative injunction emphasizing a linear social order and the way it positions single women within collective timetables. This form of horizontal and vertical lineup is also represented in the symbolic figure of the bridesmaid and accentuated during social events such as the catching of the bouquet ritual.

This is reminiscent of Barry Schwartz's observations with respect to what he discerns as the relation between waiting, punishment, and power relations. For Schwartz, punitive sanctioning through the imposition of waiting is met in its most extreme form when a person is not only kept waiting, but is also ignorant as to how long he must wait. He then finds himself in an "interactional precarious state wherein he might confront, recognize and flounder in his own vulnerability or unworthiness" (Schwartz, 1975:38). Thus, summarizes Schwartz, waiting is the crossroads not only between past and future, but also between certainty and uncertainty (Schawartz, 1975).

In the single woman's case, waiting signifies social tardiness with its attendant social consequences and sanctions. This becomes more complicated in

[14] Heart (2008).

the face of uncertainty. The reincorporation into society marked by finding one's soulmate and building a family may or may not happen. In this sense, a different kind of waiting time experience is formulated in which the termination of one's liminal status remains vague and constantly in doubt and continually produces and upholds sociotemporal power relations.

CONCLUSION

In many ways, single women are under constant social surveillance. They are constantly being questioned: So what's new? Are you seeing anyone? What are you waiting for?! They are constantly being warned that they are liable to miss their train or die alone. All these familiar utterances, I suggest, also reflect and enhance the hierarchical relations embedded within the theme of the "waiting single woman." I suggest that this cacophony of voices is an interesting manifestation of the informal power relations embedded within a particular highly disciplinary temporal system that differentiates between the waiting single woman and the nonwaiting, nonsingle woman.

In a similar vein, Mann has argued that the queue can be perceived as *a miniature social system* of shared behavioral norms (Mann, 1969). Pursuant to this analogy, single women's status can be measured according to their location in the queue and whether or not they can stand in line at all. By the same token, it is evident how the various clichés and images of the waiting single woman, such as the bridesmaid or the single woman singing and waiting for the "Man I Love," depict and form such *a miniature social system*, a symbolic line. For example, the person who blesses the single person is evidently not considered to be standing in the same line as her. This encounter implies the tacit hierarchy of a temporal order, thus reinforcing the explicit and implicit boundaries between the person doing the blessing and the person being blessed.

In this symbolic line, the single woman does not know exactly if and when she will reach its end. It is unclear to the single woman and to the observer whether or not the queue can be beaten and whether there is any potential for queue-jumping, queue-drifting, or leaving the queue altogether. Therefore, a corresponding social division is fabricated for the waiting single woman by the nonwaiting, nonsingle woman, who presumably does not have to stand in line anymore. A particular temporal framework is constantly formed and reformed, embedded within explicit and implicit cultural beliefs about societal and temporal norms and expectations.

However, single women above a certain age symbolize a disruption of the sequential rhythm of our social lives. As Moore elaborates: "The sequential ordering of activities provides a priority schedule in the strict sense, which may reflect priorities in the loose sense of relative values" (Moore, 1963:48). Indeed, such clichés and images reflect such a rigid form of sequential ordering, representing, and producing temporal orders. These almost unnoticed

miniature systems lie at the heart of the sociotemporal discursive formations and practices of singlehood.

This article has dealt with a prevalent discursive representation according to which the single woman's time and subjectivity are perceived as belonging to a bystander, a constant candidate and passive daydreamer, waiting for the unknown. Additionally, the temporal account of waiting can open fresh avenues for exploring some of the temporal aspects of social identity, for example, in the case of refugees waiting for entry or citizenship, patients waiting for an organ donation, or a couple waiting to conceive their first child. Neoliberal rhetoric also perceives waiting as standing in contrast to what Rose has termed the "enterprising self" (Rose, 1990). As such, waiting is a violation of the injunction for agency, initiative, and self-governance. According to this logic, common representations of unemployed persons waiting for a job opportunity can be understood as representing passivity and laziness.

Throughout this article, I have paid particular attention to the ways temporal discursive factors define, express, circulate, and regulate singlehood. Observing singlehood as a discursive formation constantly being made and remade thus enables us to develop a richer theoretical and analytical framework for this sociological phenomenon, which is still largely perceived as a transitory, temporary life phase. Furthermore, the above discussion has attempted to demonstrate how the invention, allocation, and acquisition of time reproduce hierarchal distinctions with regard to a vast range of temporal arrangements and regulatory discursive mechanisms. In this sense, the temporal discourse presented here can be seen as enhancing and reflecting a range of long-established and new regulatory measures related to the unsettling and disrupting image of late singlehood.

As has been argued, singlehood is still, to a large extent, discursively framed as a liminal, temporary state; a transitory stage on the way to couplehood and family life. In similar fashion, lifelong singlehood marks an unexpected disruption and a normatively liminal state that has unexpectedly become permanent. Another notable conclusion we can draw from the temporal representations of waiting is that lifelong singlehood is still socially unacceptable and incomprehensible, as it defies conventional conceptual frameworks and social timetables.

The *Bekarov Ezlech* blessing or "What's new?" genre of questions can be regarded as reflecting and endorsing this temporal imagery. They remind single women of their expected life trajectories, of their overly extended, illegitimate wait; remind them that they are running behind schedule. Moreover, this particular temporal position is entrenched within dominant assumptions with respect to the single woman's supposedly inherent passive or lazy traits. Effectively, this culturally constructed immobility assigns the *blame* for her personal failure to the single woman herself. Hence, waiting can also acquire the connotations of a nonproductive subjectivity, laziness and nonproductivity, and in this sense can also be viewed as immoral.

As noted earlier, my analysis of waiting forms part of a larger study in which I have explored sociotemporal aspects of singlehood. The prevalent representations of single women waiting are interwoven with constructs of wasting or accumulating time and are embedded in pervasive understandings of the ramifications of "irreversible time" in which single women's time is "running out." In fact, waiting becomes ever more intolerable and incomprehensible in common representations of single women when one begins to "lose" time; when one's biological clock is "ticking" and time is slowly and hastily slipping away. Moreover, waiting also marks "being stuck" and having one's life on hold. Thus, the waiting period in a single woman's life trajectory can also be interpreted as a "delay," as not being "on time," or not "keeping up with the 'right' societal pace."

Summing up the above analysis, we may conclude that, to a large extent, singlehood is discursively framed as a liminal, temporary state; a transitory stage on the way to couplehood and family life. In this light, I suggest that late singlehood should be viewed as an invented stage and as a relatively new social category in the context of the new sentimental order (Bawin-Legaros, 2004) and transformation of intimate relations (Giddens, 1992). My contention is that prolonged singlehood, like childhood, adolescence, or old age, is in many ways an invented construct resulting from contingent discursive processes. Accordingly, we should examine singlehood as a cultural fiction through which contemporary social realities are manufactured and fabricated. Late singlehood is characterized by its main feature, the delay in getting married, a liminal state that has seemingly transgressed and violated its expected temporal boundaries. Against this background, from a certain stage in the single woman's life trajectory, waiting is related to growing personal, familial, and communitarian uncertainty and social anxiety.

Singlehood, then, is still to a large extent an undertheorized sociological subfield and the cultural and symbolic dimensions of singlehood are relatively underemphasized in contemporary literature on the subject. The aim of this article has been to fill this theoretical lacuna and contribute toward the future development of a *sociology of singlehood*. The call for future studies that also attempt to theorize singlehood will hopefully lead to the possibility of envisioning new forms of social being and well-being. Such an analysis, I hope, would itself be a site for future discursive and social change.

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