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A Singles Studies Perspective on Mount Marriage

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Singles Studies? What's that? It is an area of studies that should exist but does not (DePaulo, Moran, & Trimberger, 2007). We need perspectives grounded in single life for the same reasons that we have needed Women's Studies programs, Black Studies programs, and so many other programs representing people who had long been marginalized or ignored in academic research. Without such perspectives, we academics become too narrow-minded in the assumptions we make that we never properly test, the questions we ask, the data we report, and how we interpret those data. Diversity helps us think about the world in ways that are not, for example, too male or too White or too married.

A singles perspective is significant for another reason: In a dramatic shift from the past, the United States is becoming a nation of single people (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006, 2011, 2013). In 1970, only about 38 million Americans 18 and older were not married (i.e., they were divorced or widowed or they had always been single); that was 28% of the adult population. By 2012, there were 103 million unmarried Americans, more than 44% of the population. In 1970, about 70% of all households included a married couple; by 2011, only 49% did. Knock on the door of any contemporary American household, and you are more likely to find a single person living alone than a married couple with children. In what is perhaps the most telling statement of how we live, Americans now spend more years of their adult lives unmarried than married (DePaulo, 2006).

Before I launch into my critique, I want to begin with my bottom line. "The Suffocation of Marriage" is an important contribution. I love the sweep of it, the integration of so many lines of research, the intriguing predictions, the supportive evidence, and the innovative ways of thinking it offers. I have been reading the literature on the implications of marital status for many years, and in all that time, I can't think of another academic article I have appreciated more. I hope it generates lots of research and gets plenty of well-deserved attention. But alas, I'm not here just to talk pretty to the authors.

What "Marriage Benefit"?

In a discussion of the purported "marriage benefit," Finkel, Hui, Carswell, and Larson (this issue) make an acknowledgment that it all too rare in the literature on marital status and health—that there is currently hardly any difference in the health of married people and people who have always been single. They define the "marriage benefit" as "the superior health outcomes of married relative to unmarried individuals." In the literature more broadly, though, such a presumed benefit has been affixed to all manner of outcomes, such as happiness, longevity, sexual satisfaction, and more (reviewed and critiqued in DePaulo, 2006, 2011a, in press).

There is a problem, though, with the way in which researchers have tried to document that purported benefit. It is so fundamental that I don't think scholars can claim that any such benefit has been definitively established. Let me explain with an example from outside the realm of marital status. Suppose a drug company wanted to make the case that a drug that has been on the market for many decades—I'll call it Scammy—is really very beneficial. To do so, they let people decide whether to take Scammy. Some people who take Scammy—nearly half, in fact—hate it and refuse to keep taking it. The drug company decides that the only fair way to assess the effectiveness of Scammy is to compare the health of people currently on Scammy to that of people who are not currently on Scammy. Sometimes they even include in the not-on-Scammy group the people who tried it, hated it, and refused to continue using it. On the basis of those kinds of studies, the drug company proclaims that they have decades of research documenting a Scammy benefit.

Now suppose that you, as a research scholar with a Ph.D. in your pocket and an impressive array of articles in some of the most prestigious journals in the social sciences, saw the claim of "Scammy benefit" on a televised advertisement. Or suppose you were asked to evaluate that claim for the *New England Journal of Medicine*. This is, of course, a silly thought experiment because even undergraduates who had completed just a single introductory research methods course would probably fail to fall for that claim.

And yet, the claim of a "marriage benefit" is splayed across the best social science journals, and has been for years, with little acknowledgment of its fundamental methodological indefensibility. What these cross-sectional studies show is that married people sometimes look better than unmarried people if you

take the people who married, hated it, and got unmarried (nearly half of them) out of the marriage group, and maybe even use their lesser outcomes as further evidence for the "benefits" of marriage. What would an editor say if I proposed that, in fairness, I was going to exclude about half of the always-single people from that group, so that I'd be left with the people most likely to be especially happy with their single lives?

The fact that people self-select into marriage is not a problem that can be dispensed with methodologically, as we cannot (ethically) randomly assign people to get married or stay single or get divorced or widowed. We can, though, do the next best thing and follow people in longitudinal research as they transition, for example, from being single to being married. There are growing numbers of such studies (Luhmann, Hofmann, Eid, & Lucas, 2012), but too often even those studies give marriage an unfair and methodologically embarrassing advantage by removing from the analyses anyone who got married and then got divorced. That means that in studies of the implications of getting married for health, happiness, and other outcomes, the people who got married and did not have very positive experiences are set aside.

There is, though, a longitudinal study (Musick & Bumpass, 2012) in which Americans were followed and assessed both in the short term (within 3 years of marrying, when there is sometimes a honeymoon effect; e.g., Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2003) and in the longer term (4 to 6 years after marrying). In some of the analyses, all of the people who married were included, and not just those who stayed married. In those analyses, the people who had married at least 4 years ago were no healthier, no happier, no less depressed, and had no higher self-esteem than they had when they were single. There was, though, one way in which people differed after marrying compared to when they were single, and the results were the same regardless of whether the divorced people were included or set aside and whether the relatively recently wed or those who had wed at least 4 years ago were analyzed. In every analysis, people who got married had less contact with their parents and spent less time with their friends than they had when they were single.

There is no series of longitudinal studies over time paralleling the cross-sectional data (Liu & Umberson, 2008) used to demonstrate the purported marriage benefit and its diminution over time. That means that we do not really know in any definitive way whether there ever was a marriage benefit or whether any such benefit has shrunk over time.

Marriage Props: The Outside Help That Only Married Couples Get

In their discussion of ways in which marriage has been defreighted over time, the authors make some important points about the role of the Social Security Act, the health care system, and the criminal justice system in making it increasingly possible for single Americans to live a healthy and safe life above the poverty level. Left unacknowledged, though, are all of the ways in which official marriage remains a path to privilege. I don't just mean the social status so often accorded to married people, though that is significant. There is widespread institutional discrimination against people who are single, part of the stereotyping and stigmatizing of single people that I call *singlism* (DePaulo, 2011b).

There are more than 1,000 federal laws that offer benefits and protections only to people who are officially married. They include many tax breaks, special access to Social Security benefits and even to coverage for final expenses, a greater number of opportunities to get high-quality health care and health insurance (especially before the implementation of the Affordable Care Act), and much more (DePaulo, 2006, 2011b; Polikoff, 2008). There is discrimination against single people in the housing market, too (Morris, Sinclair, & DePaulo, 2007). In fact, the cluster of ways that only officially married people are benefited and protected has been one of the most powerful motivators of the movement for same-sex marriage rights (Polikoff, 2008).

The married couples who enjoy great health and happiness may point to the ways in which they fulfill one another's needs, perhaps especially the higher order ones, as self-congratulatory explanations. Some may even be correct in their claims. But they should not ignore the very substantial help that they receive and single people do not.

Is This a Model of Marriage or of Close Relationships? The Matter of Discriminant Validity

"As predicted by the suffocation model, the link between couple time and marital quality is statistically mediated by perceived need fulfillment. . . . In short, couple time facilitates need fulfillment, which in turn predicts relationship quality" (Finkel et al., this issue, p. 29). That's just one of the many predictions made by the suffocation model of marriage. I have a question about just about every one of these predictions and it is the same every time: Is this really a model of marriage specifically, or is it a description of all close relationships? Where is the discriminant validity?

No Ooey-Gooey Matrimaniacal Gushing in Singles Studies Class

Discussing the ways in which spouses can facilitate each other's growth and development, the authors note

that "many of the processes through which they do so require a deep emotional bond and profound insight into the partner's core essence" (p. 17). The theme is reiterated throughout the article. Relationships characterized by deep bonds and profound insights do sound amazing, but I can't help returning to the fundamentals: Where are the data? Isn't there an extensive literature showing that sometimes the road to relationship harmony is paved with bias instead of accuracy?

I'm also wondering about the discriminant validity issue again. Whatever it is that facilitates growth and development among married couples (accurate insight, partner-favoring biases, deep bonds, or anything else), wouldn't the same qualities facilitate growth and development in any close relationship, including, for example, a relationship with a best friend or a cherished sibling?

What Are Friends For?

A Singles Studies perspective would bring to the field of interpersonal relationships a bigger, broader view of the people and relationships important to us in our lives. No longer would conjugal couples stand at the center of our relationship universes, with other adult relationship partners acting as the bit players orbiting around them. Friends, for example, would be valued in and of themselves.

In contrast, here is an example of the role of friends in the "suffocation of marriage" model:

> If a man notices that his wife becomes overwhelmed when he comes to her to deal with feelings of sadness or vulnerability, he may choose to revive his relationship with his old college roommate, who was always an excellent shoulder to cry on, and call him up when needing comfort. (Finkel et al., this issue, p. 30).

In this marriage-centered view of the world, friends are people you use to give your spouse a break, and who presumably can go back to being ignored once your marriage is back on track.

Who Cares About Sex?

For those spouses who may need to invest more in their marriage, the authors have some suggestions; one is to promise to have sex at least once a week. Sex gets a lot of good press throughout the article. We learn, for example, that the companionate model of marriage added to previous iterations an expectation of sexual fulfillment. We are reminded of the ways in which women's sexual worlds expanded in important ways during the sexual revolution. We are told that in today's marriages, "the goal is not simply to have regular sex or even to have orgasmic sex, but rather to have sex that achieves a potent blend of intimate connection and ecstatic pleasure" (p. 13).

The authors bravely (and appropriately, I think) venture into the domain of consensual nonmonogamy as a potential outlet for all of that sizzling sexual passion. That's one possible way to defreight marriage. But all of the celebration of sexual activities and opportunities ignores something else entirely: Some people are just not all that interested in sex. When I wrote *Singled Out* (DePaulo, 2006), I had never heard of asexuality and it got no mention in that book. But when I started writing the Living Single blog for *Psychology Today*, I got so many requests to address the topic that I finally did a literature search and wrote a post about it. It attracted more page views than anything I have written there in more than 5 years. There is still very little scholarly attention to the topic (e.g., Bogaert, 2004; Scherrer, 2008), but in the world beyond our labs, it seems to be touching a nerve (e.g., Hills, 2012).

Historian Pamela Haag (2011) has recognized that. In *Marriage Confidential: The Post-Romantic Age of Workhorse Wives, Royal Children, Undersexed Spouses, and Rebel Couples*, she dissected some of the dilemmas of modern marriages and proposed some of the same potential solutions as do Finkel et al. (e.g., consensual nonmonogamy and living apart together). She also points out that in some marriages, one of the partners is asexual, and she offers some potential ways that the spouses can deal with that.

All of Life, Not Just Married Life

In one of the most startling sections of their article, Finkel et al. show that the end of a marriage, especially by the death of a spouse, has actually become more devastating over time (Liu & Umberson, 2008). I had studied that research very closely in the past but had been so focused on the (lack of) difference in recent years between the currently married and the always-single that I had not noticed the dramatic decrement in health outcomes for the widowed. The authors also note that even among the much shorter lived dating relationships of students, breakups seem to precipitate marked hits to self-esteem, which actually get worse over time. All of that is, as the authors note, consistent with the suffocation model prediction that "relying on one person for help with the fulfillment of so many high-altitude needs is, all else equal, problematic."

In her groundbreaking book, *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan (1963/2011) argued against those who tried to persuade women to make housework into "something more." "A baked potato is not as big as the world," she quipped (p. 67). While acknowledging that equating marriage to a baked potato is not exactly fair, I'd still like to suggest that marriage is not as big as

life. Even considering just adult life, marriage is often the smaller part of it. (And for lifelong single people, it takes up less space than a baked potato.)

From a Singles Studies perspective, marriage needs to be put in its place when it comes time to spell out the self-help implications of the suffocation model. The lessons may be very different when applied to the time when people are married as compared to the years when they are not. The option of "reoxygenating marriage" by investing in supplemental oxygen may be promising while a marriage is ongoing. Once it ends, though, that may prove to have been the worst possible strategy.

A Good Life, Not Just a Good Marriage

The belief that just about everyone wants to marry, and just about everyone does, is such a pervasive assumption, and an assumption so resistant to argument and to evidence, that Wendy Morris and I have construed it as one of the tenets of an Ideology of Marriage and Family (DePaulo & Morris, 2005, 2006). Other scholars, too, have recognized the ideological aspects of such beliefs, and investigated the implications for such significant matters as system justification (Day, Kay, Holmes, & Napier, 2011).

A Singles Studies perspective stands back from the conventional wisdom about marriage and asks a bigger question—not how can a person achieve the best marriage possible but how can people achieve the best life possible? For some people, the answer might not include marrying at all. If contemporary American society were less suffused with matrimania (DePaulo, 2006) and less hampered by ideological blinders, then more people might choose the life that truly is the most meaningful one for them, whether that involves marrying or staying single. When marrying really is a choice, then people who choose it are, I think, likely to have more successful unions. They are making a positive choice to embrace a relationship that they want, rather than (just) running away from a stigmatized single status that they fear.

Is It Really True That "Virtually All Americans Hope to Marry"?

The authors are among those who have stated as fact what I believe to be ideology. It is true, as the authors note, that about 90% of Americans will marry, and some will try it over and over again. But their further claim that "virtually all Americans hope to marry" is inaccurate and inappropriately marginalizes people who choose lifelong singlehood.

In support of their "virtually all" claim, the authors cite two studies of welfare recipients. Then they add that "three-quarters of high school seniors report that marriage is 'extremely important'" (p. 4). Do we really want to base estimates of people's hopes and desires on selective samples? Do we want to use the values of high school students to tell us about the importance of marriage in contemporary American society?

There are better sources of data. Several Pew studies, for example, surveyed representative samples of grown-ups. In one of them, single Americans were asked whether they were in a committed relationship and whether they were looking for a partner. The biggest group (55%) said that they were not in a committed relationship and that they were not looking (Rainie & Madden, 2006). When another national sample of single people was asked whether they wanted to get married, only 46% said yes, for sure (Taylor, 2010). In the same poll, about 40% said that marriage is becoming obsolete.

Also relevant are the behaviors of people who have experienced marriage. Increasingly, they do not re-up. From 1990 to 2011, the rate of remarriage for every 1,000 previously married people has plummeted from 50 to just 29.4 (Brown & Lin, 2013).

For a hint about future demographic trends, perhaps we should look to countries that have long been on the vanguard. Scandinavian nations, for example, have often been far ahead of the United States in the adoption of practices such as cohabitation—especially for nontrivial periods (Cherlin, 2009), living-apart-together (Jamieson & Simpson, 2013), and living alone (Klinenberg, 2012). All of those living arrangements are found at higher rates in most Nordic countries than in the United States. Maybe that's where we're headed.

Note

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