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No Shelter for Singles: The Perceived Legitimacy of Marital Status Discrimination

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Providing the first empirical evidence of discrimination against singles, participants in multiple experiments favored married couples over various types of singles and failed to recognize such differential treatment as discrimination. In four experiments, undergraduates and rental agents read descriptions of multiple applicants for a rental property and chose one. The applicant pool, varying across experiments, included a married couple and different types of singles. Although the applicants were similar on substantive dimensions, participants consistently chose the married couple over the singles and explicitly stated that the applicants' marital status influenced their choice. In Experiment 5, participants read examples of housing discrimination against singles and other more recognized stigmatized groups. Participants rated discrimination against singles as more legitimate than discrimination against virtually all of the other groups.

KEYWORDS discrimination, housing, legitimacy, marital status, singles

SINGLEHOOD is becoming increasingly common. In fact, in the year 2005, singles (i.e. divorced, widowed, and always single people) represented 41% of adults 18 and older, and households consisting of married couples became a minority (US Census Bureau, 2006). Elsewhere, we have argued that despite the increasing number of adults choosing to be single, American society values marriage and married couples so highly that being single is a stigmatizing condition (DePaulo, 2006; DePaulo & Morris, 2005a, 2005b, 2006; see also Byrne & Carr, 2005). The current research is the first to examine empirically whether singles are subject to an outcome typically associated with being stigmatized—discrimination. In particular, this research focuses on housing discrimination against single people and the perceived legitimacy of such discrimination.

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It has been argued that Americans uncritically accept an ideology of marriage and family that glorifies marriage as the most important peer relationship, an essential key to a meaningful life, and an indication of personal maturity (DePaulo & Morris, 2005a). Marriage is often viewed as a normative developmental milestone (e.g. Neugarten, 1976), one that most people generally want and expect to achieve (DePaulo & Morris, 2001). Similar to the Protestant Work Ethic, the ideology of marriage and family presents marriage as an important goal that can be achieved by anyone who works hard enough at finding that special someone. These beliefs about the perceived value and accessibility of marriage suggest that anyone who is not married may be called into question, particularly when beyond the age at which being married is normative.

To the extent that this interpretation of the ideology of marriage and family is correct, singles should be considered a stigmatized group. Singlehood can be defined along two dimensions. When operationalizing singlehood one could use a strict legal definition whereby anyone who is not legally married would be considered single. This is the definition most often used by the Census Bureau. However, such a definition overlooks the possibility that unmarried people who are in romantic relationships might differ from uncoupled people in the way they are perceived by others. Instead, one could use a social definition of singlehood whereby anyone who is not coupled (married or otherwise) would be considered single. Although one can conceive of relationship status as a continuum with married people on one end and people who are currently not in romantic relationships at the other end, it is informative to draw a bright line between individuals who are married and various types of singles. Consistent with the ideology of marriage and family, the former group should be treated and evaluated more positively than the latter group.

Consistent with the notion that singles are stigmatized, recent research has demonstrated that singles are indeed the targets of negative stereotypes (e.g. Conley & Collins, 2002; DePaulo & Morris, 2005a, 2006; Hertel, Schütz, DePaulo, Morris, & Stucke, in press). For example, singles are assumed to be less responsible, mature, and well-adjusted than married people (Etaugh & Birdoes, 1991; Morris, DePaulo, Hertel, & Taylor, in press).

Do singles also experience discrimination? The press has recently noted instances of housing discrimination against singles (North Dakota Fair Housing Council Press Release, 2000). A Michigan judge ruled that landlords could deny rental properties to unmarried, cohabitating couples if the landlord held religious beliefs against unmarried cohabitation. This ruling, in effect, allowed landlords to violate the state's fair housing act that prohibits marital status discrimination ('Michigan', 2000). The Virginia Housing Development Authority, which provides loans to economically disadvantaged homebuyers, has a 'family rule' which discriminates against unrelated people applying to buy a house together ('Couple', 2000). Singles are also often denied the opportunity to live in neighborhoods zoned for 'single family' use. (Unmarried America, n.d).

In order to examine whether singles experience discrimination without the confounds that can occur in actual rental situations, we examined housing discrimination against various types of singles in the lab, recruiting both rental agents and undergraduates as participants. Thus, the first question we address is whether people prefer leasing properties to married couples versus singles when presented with equally qualified applicants.

To the extent that singles are targets of housing discrimination, the next question is whether people perceive discrimination against singles as legitimate. Although the media has begun to acknowledge discrimination against singles (e.g. Conlin, 2003; Fox, 2004; Motro, 2004), most states do not have laws protecting singles from discrimination. Given the negative stereotypes of singles, the lack of efforts to protect this group from known inequities, and the broad societal support for marriage (DePaulo & Morris, 2005a), we hypothesize that people will perceive discrimination against singles as legitimate and fair.

Summary of hypotheses and experimental design

The first four experiments test the hypothesis that people discriminate against singles in the context of housing. Participants (undergraduates and adults working in rental agencies) were asked to imagine themselves as landlords and choose between two or three potential tenants. In all of these experiments, we expected participants to favor a married couple over various types of singles. The last experiment examines whether people view discrimination against singles as legitimate. Specifically, we hypothesize that even obvious examples of discrimination against a single person will not be recognized as such.

Experiments 1, 2, 3, & 4

Experiments 1, 2, 3, and 4 will be presented together because of their similar methods and results. In all of these experiments, participants read descriptions of possible tenants and chose to whom they would rent a house. Undergraduates served as participants in Experiments 1, 2, and 4; adults working in rental agencies participated in Experiment 3. In Experiment 1, the choices were a married couple, a single man, and a single woman. In case the married couple was favored because they had two sources of income, all of the choices in subsequent experiments were pairs of people with two sources of income. In Experiments 2 and 3, participants' choices consisted of pairs of people—a married couple, cohabiting romantic partners, and a pair of opposite sex friends. In Experiment 4, the choices were a married couple and cohabiting romantic partners. To examine whether people would even favor a married couple who had not demonstrated as much long-term relationship stability as a cohabiting couple, the length of marriage in Experiment 4 was manipulated (six years vs. six months) while the cohabiting romantic partners were always described as having been together for six years.

Method

Participants Undergraduates participated in Experiments 1, 2, and 4 in return for US$5 (Experiment 1) or course credit (Experiments 2 and 4). In Experiment 1 ($N = 84$; 37 men, 47 women), 63% of the participants were Caucasian, the median age was 19, and 20 participants reported being in a romantic relationship while 64 were single. In Experiment 2 ($N = 107$; 53 men, 54 women), 69% of the participants were Caucasian, the median age was 18, and 37 participants reported being in a romantic relationship while 70 were single. In Experiment 4 ($N = 97$; 13 men, 84 women), 72.9% of the participants were Caucasian, the median age was 21, and 46 participants reported being in a romantic relationship while 51 were single.

Participants in Experiment 3 were 54 adults (33 men, 21 women) working in rental agencies. Eighty-one percent of the rental agents were Caucasian and their median age was 33.5. Thirty-six of the rental agents were married or engaged while 19 were single. The rental agents participated in return for the possibility of winning a free lunch.

In all of our studies, we explore whether the participants' own relationship status is related to their perceptions and judgments of other people. When the sample consisted of college students, of whom few are married, we compared students who are in romantic relationships to those who are not in romantic relationships. When the sample consisted of older adults, of whom most are married, we compared adults who are married or engaged to those who are not legally married. Thus our working definition of singlehood varied depending upon the part of the singlehood continuum in which most of the participants fell.

Procedure and Materials Participants were asked to imagine themselves as landlords and read descriptions of two or three potential tenants. Their pool of choices included a married couple, a single woman, and a single man (Experiment 1); a married couple, an unmarried cohabiting romantic couple, and a pair of opposite sex friends (Experiments 2 and 3); a married couple and a cohabiting couple who had each been together for six years (Experiment 4a); and a married couple who had been married six

months and a cohabiting couple who had been together for six years (Experiment 4b).

In all experiments, the age range of the potential tenants was held constant (i.e. 'in their 30s') to control for the possible assumption that married people are older than singles. Each description included the applicant's job, a hobby, how they heard about the property, and why they found the property appealing. These descriptors were crossed with tenants' relationship status in a between-participants design such that relationship status was the one variable that differed by experimental condition. The order in which participants read about the applicants was counterbalanced. Below is an example of one of the descriptions:

> John and Emily are in their thirties and married. They are both high school teachers and they enjoy playing card games in their free time. John and Emily found the ad for the house on a bulletin board of a local coffee shop and they were glad to learn that the house has a large yard.

After reading the descriptions of two or three potential tenants, participants were asked to choose to whom they would prefer to lease the house and to explain their decision in an open-ended format. Participants then rated each of the potential tenants on eight 7-point scales assessing positive and negative qualities associated with good and delinquent tenants. These scales assessed how irresponsible tenants would be in terms of keeping the house clean, damaging the house, being noisy, paying their rent on time, and breaking the lease. Participants' ratings on these scales were coded such that higher numbers indicated more negative qualities. We created a delinquency composite from the mean of the eight ratings (Experiment 1: alpha = .84; Experiment 2: alpha = .71, Experiment 3: alpha = .90, Experiment 4: alpha = .82). Participants also predicted the amount of time they thought each applicant would want to stay in the house.

Results

Did participants discriminate against singles? To test the hypothesis that most participants would choose the married couple over the single applicants we conducted chi-square tests. All four experiments supported our hypothesis. Participants overwhelmingly favored the married couple over all of the various types of singles; 61 to 80 percent of the participants chose the married couple. See Table 1.

Did participants have negative views of singles? To examine whether participants assumed that singles were more likely to have negative qualities, the composite assessing participants' evaluations of each potential tenant's qualities was entered into a 3 (type of applicant) × 2 (participant gender) × 2 (participant relationship status) analysis of

Table 1. The number of participants who chose each type of applicant

Experiment	Number of people who chose each type of applicant			χ^2
	Married couple	Single woman	Single man	
Experiment 1	59 (70%)	15 (18%)	10 (12%)	51.93**
	Married couple	Cohabiting couple	Friends	
Experiment 2	86 (80%)	13 (12%)	8 (8%)	106.90**
Experiment 3	28 (61%)	11 (24%)	7 (15%)	16.22**
	Married couple (6 years)	Cohabiting couple (6 years)		
Experiment 4a	37 (79%)	10 (21%)		15.51**
	Married couple (6 months)	Cohabiting couple (6 years)		
Experiment 4b	35 (71%)	14 (29%)		9.00*

* $p < .005$; ** $p < .001$.

Note: Eight people said they did not have enough information to choose in Experiment 3.

variance (ANOVA) in Experiments 1, 2, and 3. In Experiment 4, the length of marriage (six months or six years) was also a factor and there were only two types of applicants—a married couple and cohabiting romantic partners. Because undergraduate participants in Experiments 1, 2, and 4 were unlikely to be married, participant relationship status referred to whether or not the participants were in romantic relationships in these experiments. Because participants in Experiment 3 were older, in this experiment participant relationship status could refer to whether or not participants were married (or engaged).

In all four experiments, participants rated married couples significantly more positively (i.e. less likely to be delinquent) than almost all of the various types of singles (see Table 2). The only exceptions were that the single woman was perceived almost as positively as the married couple (Experiment 1) and the cohabiting couple was perceived just as positively as the married couple if they had been together longer than the married couple (Experiment 4b). In all of these experiments, there were no significant main effects or interactions involving the gender or relationship status of participants.

The same ANOVA designs described above were conducted with the predicted length of stay as the dependent variable. In every experiment but one, participants assumed the married couple would want to remain in the house longer than the various types of singles. The only exception was Experiment 4b in which the cohabiting couple had been together longer than the newlywed married couple. In this experiment, participants thought that the two couples would want to stay in the house an equal length of time (see Table 2).

Given that participants in almost every experiment assumed that married people would stay in the house longer and be less delinquent than the various types of single tenants, one might wonder whether these differing perceptions of married and single applicants were driving the participants' choices. We addressed this question using multinomial logistic regression. The preferred choice of applicant was the criterion variable; the three delinquency ratings and the three expected lengths of stay were all entered as potential predictors.[1]

These analyses did not yield consistent results. In Experiments 1, 2, and 3, whether participants chose the single over the married couple was

Table 2. Delinquency ratings and predicted length of stay in house (in years) for each type of applicant

Experiment		Delinquency and length of stay for each type of applicant			*F*
		Married couple	Single woman	Single man	
1	Delinq.	2.57^{a}	2.82^{a} ($d = 0.41$)	3.36^{b} ($d = 1.21$)	17.18***
	stay	3.62^{a}	2.19^{b} ($d = 1.29$)	1.93^{b} ($d = 1.52$)	33.96***
		Married couple	Cohabiting couple	Friends	
2	Delinq.	2.38^{a}	3.22^{b} ($d = 1.44$)	3.55^{c} ($d = 1.68$)	42.15***
	stay	3.62^{a}	1.89^{b} ($d = 1.98$)	1.27^{c} ($d = 2.68$)	109.14***
3	Delinq.	2.53^{a}	2.84^{b} ($d = 0.69$)	3.05^{b} ($d = 0.74$)	3.91*
	stay	2.29^{a}	1.86^{b} ($d = 0.71$)	1.47^{c} ($d = 1.07$)	8.61***
		Married couple (6 years)	Cohabiting couple (6 years)		
4a	Delinq.	2.56^{a}	3.16^{b} ($d = 0.93$)		9.31**
	stay	3.66^{a}	2.13^{b} ($d = 1.47$)		23.17***
		Married couple (6 months)	Cohabiting couple (6 years)		
4b	Delinq.	2.87^{a}	2.98^{a} ($d = 0.15$)		0.25
	stay	3.24^{a}	3.22^{a} ($d = 0.01$)		0.001

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .005$; *** $p < .001$.

Notes: d = effect size for comparison with married couple. Cells in the same row that do not share superscripts reliably differ from each other at $p < .05$.

related to their beliefs about how delinquent the applicants would be (all *p*s < .057). However, the findings were not consistent across the three experiments in terms of which applicants' delinquency ratings were the significant predictors (e.g. the delinquency ratings of the single applicant, the delinquency ratings of the married couple, or both). Perceived length of stay did not significantly relate to participants' choices in Experiments 1, 2, & 3 (all *p*s > .06). In Experiment 4, however, delinquency ratings did not significantly relate to choice (all *p*s > .29), and perceived length of stay only did so when the cohabitating couple was together longer than the married couple ($p < .05$).

What rationale did participants provide to explain why they chose the married couple? If perceived delinquency and length of stay do not consistently account for participants' choice, why did participants overwhelmingly choose the married couple over various types of singles? To get insight into this question, we analyzed participants' responses to the open-ended item asking why they made the choice they did. We first created a coding scheme to incorporate all of the reasons mentioned.[2] Two research assistants then coded the data by assigning participants a 1 if they mentioned a reason and a 0 if they did not mention that reason. Reliabilities between coders (alpha) were .86, .88, .73, and .77 for Experiments 1 through 4, respectively. Finally, the number of times each of the reasons was mentioned was entered into a between-participants ANOVA with type of applicant chosen as the independent variable.

Across all four experiments, there was one explanation that was significantly more likely to be mentioned when participants chose the married couple rather than any of the alternatives. Most of the participants who chose the married couple stated that they did so simply because the married couple was married (see Table 3). In fact, in Experiments 3 and 4, this was the only explanation that differed between people who chose the married couple and those who chose the alternatives. There were a couple of additional explanations given in Experiments 1 and 2 and these will be described below.

Experiment 1 Participants who chose the married couple were more likely to explain their choice by mentioning that two incomes are better than one (20%) than did participants who chose the single woman (0%, $p < .05$, $d = .45$) or the single man (0%, $p = .09$, $d = .39$) ($F(2, 81) = 3.08$, $p = .05$). Of course, the presence of other applicants with two incomes did not prevent participants from selecting the married couple over the various forms of singles in subsequent experiments. Participants who chose the married couple were also more likely to mention the benefits of renting to people who might have children (20%) than did participants who decided to

Table 3. Percentage of participants who gave relationship status as the rationale for their choice

Experiment	Participants' choice for tenant			*F*
	Married couple	Single woman	Single man	
1	42%[a]	13%[b] ($d = 0.50$)	0%[b] ($d = 0.63$)	5.47*
	Married couple	Cohabiting couple	Friends	
2	68%[a]	43%[b] ($d = 0.37$)	13%[b] ($d = 0.63$)	6.38**
3	61%[a]	20%[b] ($d = 0.77$)	0%[b] ($d = 1.11$)	6.85**
	Married couple (6 years)	Cohabiting couple (6 years)		
4a	84%[a]	10%[b] ($d = 1.70$)		32.54***
	Married couple (6 months)	Cohabiting couple (6 years)		
4b	63%[a]	21%[b] ($d = 0.81$)		7.66**

*$p < .01$; **$p < .005$; ***$p < .001$.

Note: d = effect size for comparison with people who chose the married couple. Cells in the same row that do not share superscripts reliably differ from each other at $p < .05$.

lease the property to either the single woman (0%, $p < .05$, $d = .45$) or the single man (0%, $p = .09$, $d = .39$) ($F(2, 81) = 3.08$, $p = .051$). While many participants who chose the married couple explained their choice by mentioning the benefits of leasing to people with children, people who chose the single applicants were more likely to mention the disadvantages of leasing to people who might have children. Participants who chose the married couple were less likely to mention the disadvantages of leasing to people who might have children (0%) than did those who chose the single man (40%, $p < .001$, $d = 1.15$) or the single woman (13%, $p < .05$, $d = .45$) ($F(2, 81) = 14.09$, $p < .001$). Although participants who chose the single man and woman were more likely to explain their choice by mentioning the disadvantages of leasing to people who might have children, married people were still strongly preferred by the majority of the participants.

Experiment 2 Participants were more likely to mention the stability of the relationship between the applicants if the chosen applicants were married (52%) than if they were unmarried but romantically involved (14%, $p < .01$, $d = 0.54$) or if they were friends (0%, $p < .005$, $d = 0.58$) ($F(2, 104) = 7.45$, $p = .001$). However, in Experiment 4 equating the apparent stability of the applicants' relationship did not prevent preference for the married couple. Participants who chose the married couple were also more likely to explain their choice by saying that the chosen applicants would be more likely to pay the rent (44%) than did participants who chose the cohabiting, romantic couple (14%, $p < .05$, $d = 0.43$) or the friends (0%, $p < .05$, $d = 0.50$) ($F(2, 104) = 5.01$, $p < .01$).

Summary of results It is clear that people discriminate against singles when making rental decisions. In Experiments 1, 2, 3, and 4, participants, including the ones who actually worked at rental agencies, overwhelmingly chose to lease properties to the married couple over the different types of single applicants even though there were no substantial differences between the applicants. Although participants assumed that most of the single applicants were more likely to be delinquent tenants than the married couple and leave the rental property sooner, the married couple was even preferred over alternatives who were not perceived as significantly more delinquent or more likely to leave the rental property sooner. Moreover, no specific delinquency or length of stay ratings consistently related to choice across experiments. When participants were asked to state why they made the choice they did, they rarely mentioned perceptions of delinquency or how long they expected the applicants to stay in the house. Instead, participants often explicitly stated that the applicants' marital status influenced their choice. Thus, it appears that participants were perfectly comfortable using the applicants' relationship status as a basis for their decisions, to the detriment of the singles.

Experiment 5

Having shown in Experiments 1 through 4 that participants discriminate against singles, we were interested in learning how people view this type of discrimination. Because participants mentioned marital status as if it were an appropriate way to choose among applicants in Experiments 1 through 4, we hypothesized that unfair treatment of a single person would be perceived as legitimate.

Method

Participants Ninety-three undergraduate students (20 men, 73 women) volunteered to participate in return for extra credit in a psychology course. Forty-four of the students were in romantic relationships and 49 were not. The median age in the sample was 20. Information about the participants' ethnicity was not collected. These participants were drawn from the same population as those in Experiments 1, 2, and 4.

Procedure and materials In this between-participants experiment, each participant read one of six scenarios describing an instance of housing discrimination. In each scenario, the landlord chose a member of a non-stigmatized

group over a member of a stigmatized group who was willing to pay *more* rent (i.e. a married person was chosen over a single person even though the single person offered to pay more rent, a Caucasian was chosen over an African American, a man over a woman, a straight person over a homosexual person, a thin person over an obese person, or a younger person over an elderly person). Thus, the independent variable was the type of discrimination. Below is an example of a scenario describing discrimination against a single person:

> A landlord is hoping to find someone to rent a house. The landlord has shown the house to many people and has narrowed down the choice to 2 potential tenants. Both of the applicants have steady jobs and their current landlords described them as very good tenants. One of the applicants has offered to pay a slightly higher rent each month. The tenant who has offered to pay higher rent is single. The landlord prefers to lease houses to married people and decides to accept the married person as the tenant.

After reading the scenario, participants were asked to list reasons why the landlord might have decided to choose one person over the other. Participants then rated how legitimate they believed the landlord's decision to be on six 9-point scales. These scales measured the extent to which participants thought the landlord's decision was prejudiced, legitimate, justifiable, reasonable, as well as how reluctant they thought the landlord might be to explain the decision publicly, and how comfortable the participant would feel making the same decision. Their responses were coded such that higher numbers indicated greater perceived legitimacy**,** then averaged (alpha = .91). Participants also responded to the question, 'To what extent do you think the chosen person would be a better tenant than the person who was not chosen?' Finally, participants were asked to recall which person offered to pay more money. All participants passed this manipulation check.

Results

Was discrimination against a single person perceived as more legitimate than other types of discrimination? A 2 (type of discrimination: single vs. other) × 2 (participant gender) × 2 (participant relationship status) ANOVA tested the hypothesis that discrimination against a single person is perceived as more legitimate than other types of discrimination. In support of our hypothesis, this analysis yielded a main effect of type of discrimination ($F(1, 85) = 33.08$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.25$). Discrimination against singles was rated as more legitimate ($M = 5.71$) than discrimination against the other five groups ($M = 3.46$) . Men rated all types of discrimination as more legitimate ($M = 5.20$) than did women ($M = 3.97$) ($F(1, 85) = 9.86$. $p < .005$, $d = 0.68$).

In order to determine whether the six specific types of discrimination differed from each other in terms of perceptions of legitimacy, a one-way between-participants ANOVA was conducted with six levels of the type of discrimination as the independent variable. There was a main effect of type of discrimination ($F(5, 89) = 14.08$, $p < .001$). Pairwise comparisons revealed that discrimination against a single person ($M = 5.37$) and an elderly person ($M = 4.75$) were both seen as more legitimate than discrimination against an African American ($M = 2.60$, both ps $< .001$), a homosexual person ($M = 2.97$, both ps $< .005$), a woman ($M = 3.10$, both ps $< .01$), and an obese person ($M = 2.74$, both ps $< .001$). There were no significant differences within each of these two clusters of groups. There was also no interaction between gender and type of discrimination and no effects of participants' relationship status in either of these analyses.

Did the participants agree with the landlord's discriminatory decision? Participants were more likely to agree with the landlord's choice of tenant if they read about discrimination against singles ($M = 5.68$) versus the other five types of discrimination ($M = 4.97$) ($F(1, 85) = 12.92$, $p < .005$, $d = 0.78$). Men were more likely to agree with the landlord's choice ($M = 5.52$) than were women ($M = 5.13$) ($F(1, 85) = 3.99$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.43$).

In order to determine whether the six specific types of discrimination differed from each other in terms of whether participants thought the landlord made the right choice, a one-way ANOVA was conducted with six levels of type of discrimination as the independent variable. There was a main effect of type of discrimination

($F(5, 89) = 2.14$, $p = .068$). Pairwise comparisons revealed that participants were more likely to think the landlord made the right choice if the target of discrimination was a single person ($M = 5.47$) than an African American ($M = 4.85$, $p < .05$), a woman ($M = 4.90$, $p < .05$), a homosexual person ($M = 4.92$, $p < .05$), an elderly person ($M = 5.00$, $p < .10$), or an obese person ($M = 5.07$, $p < .10$). There were no significant differences among the non-singles. In addition, there was no interaction between gender and type of discrimination and no effects of participants' relationship status in either of these analyses.

What rationale did participants provide to explain the landlord's decision? In order to analyze participants' responses to the open-ended question about why the landlord might have chosen one applicant over the other, we used the same technique described in Experiments 1 through 4 (reliability between coders: alpha = .88).[2] In the open-ended responses, participants were more likely to attribute the decision to prejudice or stereotyping when the target of discrimination was a member of one of the five culturally recognized stigmatized groups (38%) than when the target was single (10%) ($F(1, 91) = 8.31$, $p = .005$, $d = 0.60$). It is interesting to note that although participants' attributions to prejudice or stereotyping were negatively correlated with perceived legitimacy of the landlord's decision when the target was a member of one of the five culturally recognized groups, ($r(63) = -.43$, $p < .001$), this correlation was no longer significant when analyses only included single targets, ($r(30) = -.12$, $p = .52$). The difference between these two correlations was significant ($p < .05$). Therefore, it appears that people do not associate prejudice or stereotyping with making an illegitimate decision when they read about discrimination against singles even though they do so for other types of discrimination.

In addition, participants were more likely to mention that the chosen person would preserve the property better than the person who was discriminated against if they read about discrimination against singles (50%) versus the other types of discrimination (17%) ($F(1, 91) = 10.54$, $p < .005$, $d = 0.68$). Similarly, participants were more likely to think that the chosen person would stay in the rental property longer if they read about discrimination against singles (73%) versus the other types of discrimination (29%) ($F(1, 91) = 13.87$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.78$).

Summary of results

In support of our hypothesis, discrimination against singles was perceived as more legitimate than other more recognized forms of discrimination. Consistent with this, when asked to explain the landlord's choice, participants were less likely to recognize that the landlord may have used stereotypes when they read about discrimination against singles compared to other types of discrimination.

General discussion

In Experiments 1 through 4, undergraduates and rental agents strongly preferred to lease to a married couple over a single woman, a single man, a cohabiting romantic couple, and a pair of opposite-sex friends. This discrimination against singles cannot be explained by the assumption that married people are older than singles because age and other potentially relevant demographics (e.g. occupation) were held constant.

There were, however, some differences in the perceptions of the married couple, as compared to most of the other applicants. On a composite tapping potential delinquency, married couples were perceived as significantly less worrisome than the single man, the pair of friends, or the cohabiting couple (except when the cohabiting couple had been together longer than the married couple). The assumption that singles are more likely to be delinquent than married couples is generally consistent with the stereotypes found in past research, such as the belief that singles are less responsible and mature than married people (Etaugh & Birdoes, 1991; Morris et al., in press).

It is interesting to note, though, that for all groups, the mean delinquency ratings were below the midpoint, suggesting that none of

the applicants were viewed as terribly likely to cause problems. In addition, the delinquency ratings of the single woman (Experiment 1) and the cohabiting couple who had been together longer than the married couple (Experiment 4b) were not significantly different from those of the married couple, yet participants still strongly favored the married couple in those experiments. Finally, no specific type of delinquency rating (e.g. of single person or married couple) consistently related to tenant choice over and above the other measures. As such, it is safe to say that presumed delinquency on the part of single people relative to married people was not the sole reason for preferring married applicants.

In fact, in all four experiments, the reason most often offered for preferring the married couple was simply that they were married. Thus participants felt perfectly comfortable basing their decision on the marital status of the applicants. If the preference for married couples over single applicants was not consistently related to the perception that singles were more delinquent than married people, why might participants have exhibited such a strong preference for married couples? Consistent with the ideology of marriage and family, it is possible that participants chose married tenants based on implicit, positive attitudes about married people and implicit, negative attitudes about single people (Ritter, 2003). Future research could examine whether discrimination against singles is related to implicit attitudes.

If we had manipulated the race or gender of the tenants, it is inconceivable that participants would have unabashedly admitted that they chose a White person because of his or her race or a man because of his gender. In Experiment 5, we sought to examine the acceptability of discrimination against singles by comparing perceptions of this form of discrimination to perceptions of discrimination against groups recognized as stigmatized, such as African Americans. When the target of discrimination was a member of a group culturally recognized as stigmatized, participants cried foul, but they rarely did so when the target of the discrimination was a single person. When people read about discrimination against singles, they perceived it to be relatively legitimate and failed to recognize that stereotypes or prejudice might have affected the landlord's decision.

When the results of these experiments are taken together, there appears to be quite a paradox. Participants in Experiments 1 through 4 showed a strong and consistent tendency to choose the married couple over all types of singles, even though they were similar on all substantive dimensions. Moreover, all but one of the eight effect sizes calculated to compare the use of relationship status as a rationale for selection for married versus single applicants were medium or large (Cohen, 1977). Despite the size and consistency of preference for married applicants over similarly qualified single applicants, participants in Experiment 5 did not recognize this practice as discriminatory.

It is also striking that relationship status did not seem to influence the degree to which participants recognized discrimination against singles as such. In all five experiments, we examined whether participants' own status as currently in a romantic relationship or not (Experiments 1, 2, 4, 5) or married/engaged or not (Experiment 3) moderated their decisions or perceptions. It never did. Single participants were just as likely to practice discrimination as were coupled participants, and just as likely to perceive discrimination against a single person as legitimate. One could argue that singles' participation in, and lack of acknowledgment of, discrimination against their group provides evidence of system justification (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004) and the uncontested nature of the ideology of marriage and family (DePaulo, 2006; DePaulo & Morris, 2005a, 2006).

Moreover, it may be the case that most singles are unaware of their disadvantage (Byrne & Carr, 2005; Morris, 2005). When Byrne and Carr (2005) analyzed data from a nationally representative sample, the Midlife Development in the United States survey (MIDUS), they found that singles were no more likely than married people to think they had ever been discriminated against when trying to rent or buy a house. This was true when controlling for such factors as age, race, cohabiting status, formerly married status, income, education, sexual orientation,

physical appearance, etc. These perceptions singles hold are in stark contrast with the large effect sizes we have found showing a strong preference for married couples over various types of singles.

Why is it that singles do not recognize that they may have been targets of housing discrimination? According to Major, Quinton, & McCoy (2002), treatment of individuals is only considered discriminatory if that treatment is perceived as unfair as well as group-based. Discrimination against singles may not meet these two criteria in the minds of singles. As demonstrated in Experiment 5, single and coupled people alike feel that discrimination against singles is significantly more legitimate than discrimination against most other groups. Furthermore, it is not clear whether singles think of themselves as a group given how many different subcategories of singles there are (e.g. people who are divorced, widowed, coupled but unmarried, and people who are not in romantic relationships), and the fact that marital status is not a permanent characteristic. As difficult as it is to recognize instances of personal discrimination (Crosby, 1984), it might be that much more difficult for singles if they do not perceive mistreatment as unfair or group-based.

Furthermore, if people assume that most adults will not be single for long but will end up married, then discrimination against singles might seem more legitimate because it is only a temporary situation, even a rite of passage of sorts. Future research could explore the possibility that participants might perceive discrimination against singles as less fair if they are aware of the fact that today's Americans spend more years of their adult lives single than married.

Could it be that participants are simply recognizing truths about singles versus married people and, thus, making accurate decisions by choosing the married couple? We contend that this is not the case. The assumption that married people are more stable does not adequately consider the fact that 43% to 46% of marriages end in divorce or separation (Schoen & Canudas-Romo, 2006). In other words, stability on the part of married people is certainly not guaranteed. Moreover, participants still preferred married applicants when their relationship was portrayed as equally, or even less, stable than that of cohabitating applicants in Experiment 4. Perhaps, as Byrne & Carr (2005) have argued, perceptions of singles have not caught up with today's reality. Today, single women can support themselves financially and marriages are just as likely to end in divorce as happily ever after. Conceivably, it is less risky than it used to be to lease properties to singles and perhaps more risky than it used to be to lease properties to married couples.

Even if stereotypes of singles do contain a grain of truth though, it is clear from Experiment 5 that people object to stereotyping when they consider discrimination against more publicly recognized stigmatized groups. People seem to recognize that regardless of whether stereotypes reflect real group differences or not, group stereotypes do not justify discrimination against any particular individual member of a group. When evaluating discrimination against groups other than singles in Experiment 5, participants who believed that the decision was based on stereotypes tended to believe that the decision was illegitimate. When evaluating discrimination against singles, though, the correlation between perceived stereotyping and perceived legitimacy did not differ from zero. Stereotyping singles is not considered objectionable.

It could be argued that people are more accepting of discrimination against singles than other stigmatized groups because marital status is perceived to be controllable in ways that race and gender are not. Rodin, Price, Sanchez, and McElligot (1989) found that more prejudice was attributed to someone who discriminated against a target whose stigma was beyond his or her control than someone who discriminated against a target with a controllable stigma. However, we have some preliminary data that speak against this possibility; we conducted a replication of Experiment 5 in which participants only read about discrimination against people whose stigmas could potentially be perceived as controllable (Morris, Sinclair, & DePaulo, 2005). Participants in this experiment read about housing discrimination against a single person, an obese person, or a homosexual

person and reported how much control they thought the person had over his or her marital status, weight, or sexual orientation, in addition to the perceived legitimacy of the landlord's decision. Participants believed that marital status was more controllable than sexual orientation and, consistent with the results of Rodin et al., they also viewed discrimination against a single person as more legitimate than discrimination against a homosexual person. However, despite the fact that participants thought targets had no more control over their marital status than their weight, participants still thought discrimination against a single person was more legitimate than discrimination against an obese person. This finding suggests that presumed controllability over the stigma of being single does not entirely account for the acceptance of discrimination against singles relative to other types of discrimination. Of course, additional research on this question needs to be done.

Our preferred explanation is that perceptions and treatment of married and single people follow from an ideology of marriage and family that is pervasive in American society. The ideology, as described by DePaulo and Morris (2005a), unreservedly values marriage and maintains that married adults are more valuable, important, and worthy than single adults. The results of Experiment 5 support the notion that people do not seem to question whether the ideology is true, nor do they recognize that there might be something wrong with assuming that married people should be favored over singles.

As with any experiment that relies on role-play methodology and undergraduate samples, the generalizability of our results could be questioned. In order to increase the external validity of our results, we asked adults working in rental agencies to choose their preferred tenants. Experiments 2 and 3 were identical except for the fact that the former experiment included college students and the latter included rental agents. A chi-square test for independence compared the results of these two experiments. While both college students and rental agents chose to lease homes to married couples significantly more often than to cohabiting romantic partners or friends, the bias exhibited by college students was greater than that of rental agents ($\chi^2(2, N = 153) = 6.45$, $p < .05$). However, it is important to note that although the rental agents exhibited a smaller bias, their preference for married couples over singles remained statistically significant and large (61% of rental agents chose the married couple when they had three choices). It is possible that rental agents have had more experience with singles in the specific context of housing and this experience has weakened their negative evaluations of singles. Or perhaps, the bias that rental agents show in favor of married couples is smaller because they are aware of laws that prohibit discrimination based on marital status. However, despite such laws, the rental agents in this experiment demonstrated a strong preference for married couples over singles.

The data collected from rental agents in Experiment 3 also allowed us to test whether the choices rental agents make depend upon their own marital status or age. Exploratory data analyses found that the distribution of their choices between the three applicants did not vary as a function of these demographic characteristics of the rental agents. Thus it appears the tendency to choose married couples over singles is consistent across single, married, older, and younger rental agents. Of course, the ultimate test of external validity would be to observe how rental agents actually respond to real applicants whom they think are married or single. This method could be a fruitful avenue for future research.

Although we have focused on housing discrimination, the ideology of marriage and family suggests that many other types of discrimination may also affect singles. For example, there appears to be a 'marriage bonus' for men in the workplace. According to various correlational studies, married men make more money and are offered more frequent promotions than single men even when controlling for factors such as performance and seniority (Antonovics & Town, 2004; Bellas, 1992; Budig & England, 2001; Keith, 1986; Toutkoushian, 1998). Furthermore, there is anecdotal evidence that employers, assuming singles have fewer obligations outside of work, often expect singles to work longer hours than married employees without full

compensation (Burkett, 2000; Davis & Strong, 1977; DePaulo, 2006). Some have also argued that singles have difficulties when applying for adoption or in vitro fertilization (Millbank, 1997). While this list paints a grim picture of singles as the frequent targets of discrimination, the correlational and anecdotal nature of the evidence may leave unanswered questions. In the future, we hope to use controlled experiments to examine whether singles are the targets of these other types of discrimination and explore perceptions of discrimination against singles in these domains as well.

Notes

1. The correlations between the delinquency ratings and the estimated lengths of stay for each applicant were calculated in all four experiments to rule out collinearity. The average correlations collapsing across all of the experiments were as follows: married couple: $r = -.25$; cohabiting couple: $r = -.33$; friends: $r = -.24$; single woman: $r = -.32$; single man: $r = -.37$. Therefore, the delinquency ratings and the perceived lengths of stay in the house for each applicant were not extremely redundant.
2. The full list of reasons can be obtained by contacting the first author.

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