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She's single, so what?

How are singles perceived compared with people who are married?

Sie ist Single …, na und? Wie werden Singles im Vergleich zu verheirateten Personen wahrgenommen?

Abstract
Over the past few decades, relationship patterns have become more diverse. Besides classical marriage we find cohabitation, romantic partners living apart, and same-sex couples. Furthermore, single people have become an important and intensely discussed segment of society. Due to the increasing plurality of living arrangements, one might assume that stereotypes about singles have changed over the years. Our study shows that married people are generally still seen more positively than singles. Singles were seen as more lonely, less warm and caring than married people. However, some positive features are ascribed to singles, too. Importantly, characteristics of the perceiver moderate his or her perceptions. Some groups rated single people as more sophisticated and sociable than married people.

Key words: social perception, romantic relationships, single people

Zusammenfassung
In den vergangenen Jahrzehnten haben sich klassische Beziehungsmuster geändert. Neben der traditionellen Ehe finden sich heute nichteheliche Lebensgemeinschaften, Paare, die getrennte Haushalte führen (LATs) und gleichgeschlechtliche Paare. Daneben wurden Singles zu einer viel diskutierten Gruppe. In Anbetracht der Vielzahl an Lebensformen könnte man annehmen, dass negativ geprägte Stereotype gegenüber Singles zurückgegangen sind. Unsere Studie zeigt allerdings, dass noch immer verheiratete Personen positiver beurteilt werden als Singles. Beispielsweise werden Singles als einsamer, weniger einfühlsam und weniger fürsorglich eingeschätzt. Es zeigt sich aber auch eine tendenzielle Aufweichung des negativen Stereotyps: (jungen) Singles werden einige positive Eigenschaften zugeschrieben. Hierbei moderieren Merkmale der bewertenden Person die Einschätzung. Vor allem jüngere Frauen und ältere Singles haben ein relativ positives Bild von Singles und beurteilen sie im Vergleich zu verheirateten Personen als geselliger und weltgewandter.

Schlagworte: soziale Wahrnehmung, Partnerschaft, Singles

"Marriage is...the most natural state of man, and therefore the state in which you are most likely to find solid happiness....it is the man and woman united that make the complete human being. Separate, she wants his force of body and strength of reason, he, her softness, sensibility, and acute discernment. Together, they are more likely to succeed in world. A single man has not nearly the value he would have in the state of union. He is an incomplete animal; he resembles the off half of a pair of scissors."

Benjamin Franklin, Letter to a friend, June 25, 1745

Societal change in western industrialized societies is marked by the rise of non-conventional arrangements in romantic relationships. Marriage is characterized by growing levels of instability with divorce rates still high. Cohabitation (i.e. a man and a woman living as a couple without being married), living-apart-together (maintaining separate households, but sharing living quarters on an intermittent basis), and same-sex relationships have become more common (c.f. Martin, Specter, Martin, & Martin, 2003; Sassler & Goldscheider, 2004). Marriage and fertility postponement are common as well as a decline in the proportion of individuals who ever get married (LeBourdais & Lapierre-Adamcyk, 2004). The relationship biography of the younger generation is characterized by more and short-lived romantic relationships than was the case a few decades earlier (cf. Dekker & Matthiesen, 2004; Scheuch, 2003). Furthermore, single people have become a societal group that is growing in importance (Federal Statistical Office Germany, 2002): the proportion of young and middle-aged single people in our population has been rising constantly over the past 35 years.

Despite changing values and the increasing plurality of life styles (Schäfer, 1998) marriage and the family are, however, still regarded as normative in our culture (Nave-Herz, 1997). Other forms of living seem to be regarded as a less than optimal deviations from this norm. In our society family or at least family in a broad sense (including one parent families and cohabitation, Vascovics, 1997) is highly valued and family life is associated with emotional support and financial security (see Hradil, 2003; Zajicek & Koski, 2003). Being single deviates from this norm and singles are defined in terms of what they are not, or what they do not have. Not having a serious romantic relationship may thus evoke feelings of not having fulfilled societal norms and seeing oneself as incomplete (Hradil, 2003; Morris, DePaulo, Hertel, & Ritter, in preparation).

The present study focuses on perceptions of singles. Information on such perceptions are relevant in at least two ways. As perceptions of others feed back into self-perceptions (Tice, 1992) the public image of singles may have important implications on how singles perceive themselves and how happy and satisfied they are with their life. On a societal level, possible changes in the image of singles may be seen as an indicator of changing values and perceptions in the course of individualization and increasing plurality in patterns of living.

With respect to individual reactions the public perception of singles may be a relevant factor in the well-being of singles. Negative stereotypes may be one factor that leads to negative self-perceptions. Studies comparing personality features of single and coupled persons found that both groups are above average when report-

ing subjective well-being and global self-esteem. However, on average singles report a somewhat lower global self-esteem and less satisfaction with life. Singles are also more likely willing to change their actual status than coupled people (Hertel & Schütz, 2005; Martin, in prep.). Of course, this does not mean that this claim is true for all singles and couples (see DePaulo & Morris, 2005).

In the media singleness is sometimes praised because it conforms to today's standards of independence and flexibility. On other occasions singleness is portrayed as an egocentric life style that results from emotional deficits and results in social isolation. In the 70s and 80s a strong positive public image of singles has started to emerge. Singles were portrayed as young and attractive people who love to have fun (Hradil, 2003). As public values have recently again become more traditional, a completely positive image is not to be expected these days. We expect that today stereotypes about singles will include positive and negative aspects. Furthermore, we expect that the image of single persons will partly depend on the perceiver's characteristics, such as gender, age, and status. The study presented here focuses on single people and how they are perceived in comparison to married persons[1].

Issues of definition

So far there is no consensus about who exactly is single (Hertel & Schütz, 2007). Using a broad definition that includes groups such as always-single, divorced, and widowed people is most common in research on singles. Other definitions do not rely on legal status alone, for it is understood that there is a continuum from being single to living in a committed romantic relationship (e.g. Jaeggi, 1994). For example relationships such as living-apart-together constitute life styles that are between the traditional extremes of being married and living together versus being unmarried and living alone. Singleness is often regarded as a transitional state between romantic relationships. It is seen as a *period* of living and not as a *form* of living (Küpper, 2002).

The three most important features in categorizing single vs. coupled persons are the presence or absence of a long-lasting intimate partner, self-definition, and the age frame (being an adult for whom there are realistic alternative options in forms of living). For our study we follow the wide definition (Hradil, 1995) when recruiting (perceiver) subjects because a restriction to married vs. always single persons only would limit the number of potential participants and therefore make the groups to be studied too small. Nevertheless, we do realize that this broad definition makes the groups rather heterogeneous. Future research should follow up on this initial study and look for distinctions within the goups.

1 In this study singles were contrasted with the group of coupled persons that represents the traditional alternative to living single – being married. Future research should add comparisons on other groups of coupled people.

Historical aspects

Single people have always been part of society though the term "single" was introduced into the German vocabulary only in the 1970s (cf. Hradil, 1995). Scientific essays about single persons date back to the 1930s (Dickinson & Beam, 1934; Hollis, 1936; Wile, 1934). Historically, in almost every society or culture, single people have almost always been stigmatised (Hertel & Schütz, in press). They have been viewed as incomplete members of a population and a burden to their families of origin (cf. Hejj, 1997; Hollis, 1936; Kern, 1998). After the 1970s one might expect that the image of single people would have changed. However, research shows that negative images of single persons persist (cf. Byrne, 2000; DePaulo, 2001; DePaulo & Morris, 2005).

Differences between singles and couples

Most researchers who study single persons compare them with married ones. Early studies concluded that living alone was perceived as less desirable than being married (Duberman, 1974; Stein, 1976; Weiss, 1973). In distinguishing different groups of singles Etaugh and Malstrom (1981) hypothesized that married people are viewed most favorably, followed by the widowed, the divorced, and finally, the always-single. They hypothesized that as individual control decreased (e.g. being widowed vs. not having married) less responsibility or blame was associated with the status of being single which in turn led to less negative perceptions. The results of their study supported their hypothesis: Married people received more favorable ratings than single people. Compared with widowed and divorced persons the never-married were seen most negatively (e.g. dependent, unreliable, less sociable, and unhappy). Divorced persons were the group second in negativity. The only feature ascribed to single persons that was not completely negative was the assumption that singles are more successful in their jobs than married persons. That assumption, however, is somewhat ambivalent. Being successful normally has positive implications in a person's life (e.g. image, higher standard of living), but it also has negative aspects (stress, time pressure, and burnout). Ten years later, Etaugh and Birdoes (1991) repeated the study with similar results.

Changes over the past decades

Despite the relatively unchanged findings by Etaugh and Birdoes (1991) several authors have observed change during the last decades (Axinn & Barber, 1997; Thornton & Freedman, 1982; Yankelovich, 1981). Cargan (1981) showed that the stereotypic belief that singles are more lonesome and more promiscuous than their married counterparts do not hold true for the majority of (heterosexual) singles. Feelings of loneliness are also reported by married interviewees, and sexual promiscuity is more descriptive of the divorced than the always-single. Cargan (1981) concludes that "stereotypes have a grain of truth, but their application to the total population of singles is more misleading than revealing (p. 384)".

The persistence of such stereotypes also depends on societal norms, values, and attitudes. Thornton and Young-DeMarco (2001) examined trends in family attitudes

and values across the last four decades of the last century. One finding they ascertained was a trend regarding tolerance toward a diversity of personal and family behaviours as reflected in an increased acceptance of divorce, cohabitation, and remaining single (Axinn & Barber, 1997; Martin et al., 2003; Sassler & Goldscheider, 2004) which could suggest diminishing negative stereotypes of singles.

Derivation of hypotheses and research questions

Summing up the state of the literature, there are two opinions about the way singles are perceived: Some authors find that singles are still a stigmatized group, while others observe a positive trend in the way singles are perceived. We hypothesize that there is some validity in both views: The image of single persons may be mixed.

Is age an issue?

The way a person is perceived is very complex (cf. Anderson & Sedikides, 1991; Biernat, 2003). The image may not be determined by the relationship status of the person alone. It is likely that other characteristics such as sex, age, and information about relationship history and social networks also influence the impression a person creates (cf. Hertel, 2002; DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Quinn & Macrae, 2005).With respect to relationship status, age seems to be a crucial variable. Singledom may be accepted as a phase in life, but not as a permanent state. Singles may be regarded as easy-going at a young age but as rejected and inferior later in life.

In-group biases?

Perceiver's features may moderate their perception of targets (Markus, Smith, & Moreland, 1985). For example, in-group favoritism may lead to more positive perceptions of members of one's own status group. On the other hand, there may be strong stereotypic beliefs that are even held by the stigmatised group itself. Thus, tendencies towards in-group favouritism may be tainted by global stereotypes within a given culture. Singles are aware of the ambivalence in the public image of singles (Lewis, 1994; Lewis & Moon, 1997). It is therefore likely that they are proud of positive features attached to this status but that they also hold some negative views about their own status group. They are aware that they do not conform to the societal norm of having a partner and may feel deficient. The present study compares how single and married targets are perceived.

Perceiver's age may be a further moderating factor. Athenstaedt (2000) found that younger people are more tradition-orientated than older people. With respect to our research question, this result may imply that younger people are less in favor of non-traditional forms of living. Young people who have not experienced many relationship problems may hold illusory or at least very positive concepts of close relationships. This is also supported by findings from the German Shell-Jugendstudie (2002): About 75 % of young women and 65 % of young men at the age of 12-25

think that having a family is necessary to be happy (see also Bodenmann, 2003). Though it has been found that attitudes towards traditional union forming have changed over the past decades, people at the beginning of their relationship biography still seem to hold traditional standards[2]. This is likely to change as people gain experience entering and leaving romantic relationships.

Is gender an issue?

With respect to gender role orientation, Athenstaedt (2000) reports gender differences: men hold more traditional gender role concepts whereas women tend to favor modern gender roles. Due to societal changes as a consequence of the women's liberation movement, education, career, and individuality have become important features in women's life plans (cf. Hettlage, 2000; Sassler & Goldscheider, 2004). It has been argued that these changes have led to role confusion and feelings of loss with men (cf. Müller, Sommer, & Timm, 1999), which is to say that singledom is apt to be considered more positively by women than by men. Therefore, negative views of single persons should be expressed especially by men. They should hold a more negative view of single persons than persons who have a romantic relationship.

Method

Overview

To determine whether single people are perceived differently than people who have a romantic relationship, and whether any such differences depend on the targets' age or sex, or the age, sex, or status of the perceivers, we created vignettes describing target persons.). The independent variables of the target's age, sex, and single or married status were experimentally manipulated (2x2x2 design). The vignettes also included filler information irrelevant to our hypotheses (occupation, leisure activities, hometown). Due to constraints in sampling and related aspects of statistical power it was not possible to differentiate subgroups of people who were single and of people who had relationships when creating the vignettes. We therefore follow classical studies and just distinguish two groups by contrasting "being single" with the traditional alternative of "being married". The vignettes were presented to participants who were then asked to evaluate the person described with respect to a list of personality attributes.

2 Of course, positive examples and a well-functioning marriage in parents might influence this attitude.

Participants

The participants were 267 Germans (127 men, 140 women) of different age groups from a non-student community sample. Their mean age was 34.9 (*SD* = 9.09, *Mdn* = 36). In the questionnaire participants were asked to provide information about their present status of living as we were interested in the opinions of single and coupled persons. Present status was defined as the form of living that the participant had been in for at least six months. People who had recently changed their status, i.e. started or ended a relationship were not included. Setting this limit was important as a recent divorce, marriage, or new relationship could bias people's judgements. Contrary to the limited variability in status of our target persons (single vs. married) participation in this study was not resticted to people who were either single or married in order to maximize sample size and again gain statistical power. Participants chose between six categories: married, living together without being married, having a romantic relationship with separate apartments, not having a romantic relationship, divorced, and widowed. For data analysis we formed two groups: one-hundred and twenty-eight persons were subsumed in the group "single", consisting of 20 persons who were divorced, 2 who were widowed and 106 who had never been married and lived alone. One-hundred and thirty-nine persons were subsumed in the group of coupled persons: 73 were married and lived together, 42 lived together without being married and 24 had separate apartments. The average duration of the participants' present status of living was 10.5 years (10.91 yrs. with people who lived in a relationship, 9.11 yrs. with singles).

As we were interested in the opinions of young and middle-aged adults we set an age limit for the participants from 20 to 50 years. For analyses the population was split. Participants who were 35 years old or younger (n = 134) were termed 'younger perceivers', the others (n = 133) 'older perceivers'.

Material and procedure

Each participant rated four vignettes. The vignettes described a 25-years old single person, a 40-years old single person, a 25-years old married person, and a 40-years old married person, presented to different participants in different orders (using a Latin Square design). For half of the participants, the targets were described as women, and for the others, they were described as men. Four different women's names and four different men's names were selected, based on previous ratings of typicality for particular cohorts (Rudolph & Sporrle, 1999). Other information about the target persons was also included to fill out the vignettes. This information was counterbalanced so that the different occupations, leisure activities and hometowns appeared equally frequent in each condition.

Example: Claudia/Christoph is 25/40 years old. She/He is a laboratory assistant. During her/his leisure time s/he is interested in music and sports. She/He lives in Bochum and is single/married.

Below each description were 34 attributes (see Table 1). Attributes were derived from previous studies (Etaugh & Birdoes, 1991; Morris et al., 2005; Küpper, 2002) and literature reviews of related topics within the fields of clinical psychology, social psychology, and organizational psychology. Participants rated each target on the 34 attributes, using 9-point scales (1 through 9).[3]

Results

The 34 attributes covered a variety of facets that describe single people and married people. A first step in the analysis was to reduce the number of variables by using an exploratory factor analysis.

Structural aspects

Exploratory factor analysis. A principal-components analysis with varimax rotation was performed on the participants' percentage estimations over the 34 descriptors (see Table 1). This resulted in three factors which together accounted for 53.94 % of the variance. Factor 1, which accounted for 24.82 % of the variance had an eigenvalue of 8.44 and was broadly concerned with sophistication and sociability (17 attributes, e.g. outgoing, in love with life, has lots of friends). Factor 2, accounting for 15.45 % of the variance had an eigenvalue of 5.25 and summarized attributes focusing on loneliness and misery (8 attributes, e.g. depressive, lonely, fearful). Factor 3 accounted for 13.67 % of the total variance with an eigenvalue of 4.65. It comprised items mostly reflecting warmth and care (7 attributes, e.g. caring, warmhearted, willing to compromise). One attribute could not clearly be categorized and was excluded from further analysis. Internal consistency with all three factors proved to be relatively high ($\alpha = .94$, $\alpha = .86$, $\alpha = .86$ respectively) and could not be increased by deleting any of the items.

3 In order to avoid habituation effects when rating the targets on the attributes, the order of the attributes was different for each target.

Table 1 Exploratory factor analysis.

Item	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Sophisticated	.753		
Adventurous	.745		
Career-oriented	.714		
Intelligent	.675		
In love with life	.667		
Attractive	.649		
Self-assured	.648		
Interesting	.640		
Flexible	.629		
Pleasure-loving	.609		
Independent	.601		
Happy	.581		
Many friends	.578		
Content	.576		
Stubborn	.571	.535	
Sympathetic	.531		
Outgoing	.514		
Close friends	.496		
Fearful		.747	
Depressive		.737	
Envious		.723	
Egoistic		.719	
Shy		.703	
Lonely		.696	
Dependent		.613	
Boring		.514	
Caring			.801
Warm-hearted			.773
Willing to compromise			.740
Tolerant			.729
Emotionally open			.688
Fond of children			.633
Responsible			.457

Note. The item *spontaneaus* was excluded because of factor loading below .4. The item *stubborn* was excluded because it has two equal factor loadings and cannot be clearly assigned.

Confirmatory factor analysis. In the second phase of the analyses, a CFA was used to determine whether the factor structure derived in the EFA provided an adequate fit to the data. To test the exploratory findings the program AMOS 4.0 was used. Model 1 tested a 1-factor solution and model 2 tested a solution with three interrelated factors. The second model provided a slightly better fit to the data (see Table 2) though suggested goodness of fit levels that confirm a model well could not be attained. Nevertheless, when comparing models the Aikaike Information Criterion (AIC), the consistent AIC (CAIC), and the Bayesian Information Criterion (BIC) are important. The model that has lower values should be preferred, which is model 2 in our case.

Table 2 Confirmatory factor analysis. Goodness of Fit Summary Statistics.

	Model	CMIN	df	CFI	NFI	RMSEA	AIC	BIC	CAIC
1.	1-factor model	2927.7	495	.575	.532	.136	3059.7	3527.3	3362.5
2.	3-factor model (intercorrelated)	2139.5	492	.712	.658	.112	2277.5	2766.3	2594

Perception of singles as compared to married persons

The next step was to conduct a multivariate analysis of variance for each of these factors (sophisticated and sociable, warm and caring, miserable and lonely). Each of the three factors was a dependent variable in mixed-design analyses of variance. Status of the target (single or married) and age of the target (25 or 40) were within-participants (repeated measures) factors. Between-participant factors were target sex, participant sex, participant age, and participant status (single or coupled).

Are single people judged differently than married people? The most basic question addressed in our research is whether single people are judged differently than married people. Here we present the main effects for the status of the target persons. For two of the dependent measures, they were significant. Singled targets were judged as more miserable and lonely than married targets (*Ms* = 4.87 and 4.38 respectively), $F(1, 250) = 85.11$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.25$. Single targets were also judged as less warm and caring than married targets (*Ms* = 5.44 and 6.27), $F(1, 250) = 220{,}49$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.47$.

In the next sections, we will describe the significant moderators of the differential perceptions of single and married targets. We will indicate, for example, whether coupled perceivers judge singles more negatively than single perceivers do, and whether men judge singles more harshly than women do. However, with two of the measures – miserable and lonely, and warm and caring – the direction of the effect never changes. All groups of perceivers, regardless of age or gender or their own status as single or coupled, judge singles to be more miserable and lonely than married people, and less warm and caring than married people. The results of the interactions show only differences in the degree to which singles are judged more harshly than people who are married. For the sophisticated and sociable measure, though, there are differences in the direction of the effects. Some groups judge singles more harshly, whereas other groups judged married people more harshly.

Are older singles perceived more negatively than younger singles? We have already shown that single people are perceived as more miserable and lonely than married people, and as less warm and caring. But are singles judged even more negatively than married people when the targets are described as 40-years old than when they are described as 25-years old? The interaction of target status and target age was significant both for the miserable and lonely measure, $F(1, 250) = 25.62$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.09$, and for the warm and caring measure, $F(1, 250) = 6.89$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$. As shown in Table 3, single targets are judged more harshly than married targets on both measures, when the targets were described as 25-years olds and

when they were described as 40-years olds. As predicted, the difference was even greater with regard to the perceptions of the older targets than the younger ones (see Table 3).

Table 3 Are older singles perceived more negatively than younger singles?

	Targets					
	25-year olds			40-year olds		
	Single	Married	*Single Minus Married*	Single	Married	*Single Minus Married*
Miserable and lonely	4.63	4.34	*.29*	5.11	4.39	*.72*
Warm and caring	5.47	6.18	*-.71*	5.41	6.35	*-.94*
Sophisticated and sociable						
All perceivers	6.23	6.11	*.12*	5.86	5.89	*-.03*
Single perceivers	6.13	6.12	*.01*	6.00	5.90	*.10*
Coupled perceivers	6.33	6.10	*.23*	5.71	5.83	*-.12*

For the sophisticated and sociable measure, the results are different, $F(1, 250) = 3.23$, $p < .07$, $\eta^2 = 0.01$. When judging the younger targets, perceivers rated the single people as more sophisticated and sociable than the married people. When rating the older targets, though, there was hardly any difference in the ratings of the singles and the marrieds.

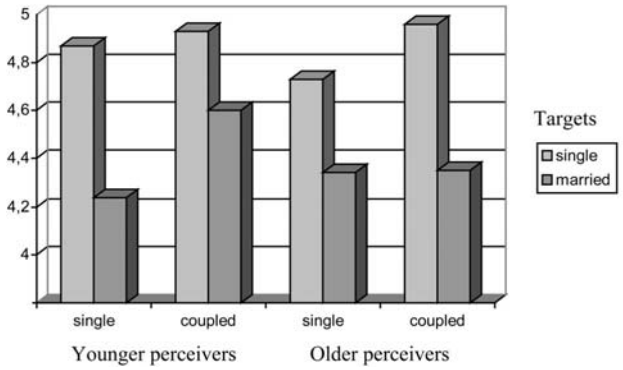
Perceptions of sophistication and sociability also depended on the status of the perceivers. The interaction of perceiver status, target status, and target age was significant, $F(1, 250) = 6.65$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$. As shown in the last two rows of Table 3, it was only the coupled perceivers who judged the younger singles as more sophisticated and sociable than the younger marrieds. The coupled perceivers judged the older singles as relatively less sophisticated and sociable than the older marrieds. The single perceivers were more positive in their perceptions of the older singles; they viewed them as relatively more sophisticated and sociable than the older married targets.

In summary, with just one exception, single targets were judged especially more harshly than married targets when the targets were 40-years old than when they were 25-years old. The single perceivers were the one exception: They viewed the single targets as more sophisticated and sociable than the married targets when the targets were 40-years olds.

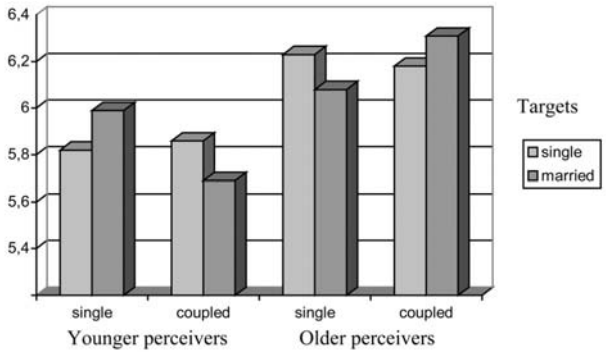
Do single people judge singles differently than coupled people do? We already described one way in which singles judge singles differently than couples do. As shown in Figure 1, there are some other differences as well. For two of the measures – miserable and lonely, and sophisticated and sociable – whether singles viewed other singles more harshly than marrieds depended on their own age or sex (for the interaction of perceiver status, perceiver age, and target status for the miserable and lonely measure, $F(1, 250) = 6.13$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$; for the sophisticated and sociable measure, $F(1, 250) = 6.48$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$). The perceivers who judged singles especially more harshly than they judged marrieds were the younger singles and the older couples.

Figure 1 Do single people judge singles differently than coupled people do? Perceptions by perceiver and target characteristics

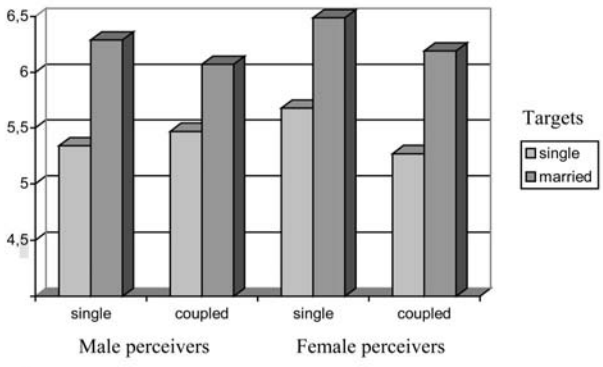
a) Perception as miserable and lonely



b) Perception als sophisticated and sociable



c) Perception as warm and caring



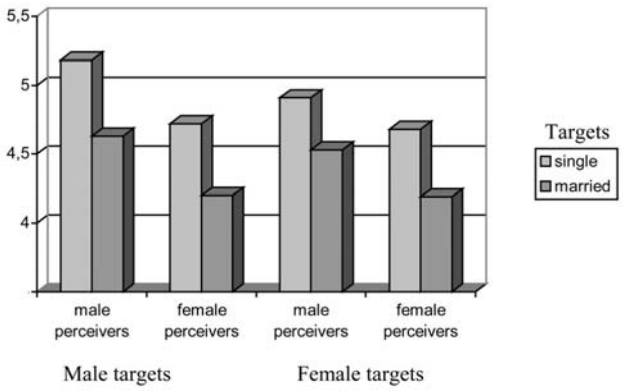
For the warm and caring measure, whether single perceivers judged singles especially more harshly than coupled perceivers depended on whether the perceivers were men or women (for the interaction of perceiver status, perceiver sex, and target status, $F(1, 250) = 4.19$, $p < .04$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$). The perceivers who judged the single targets as especially less warm and caring than the married targets were the single men and the coupled women.

The key question addressed in this section is whether perceivers who are themselves single are just as harsh in their perceptions of single targets as perceivers who are coupled. When the perceivers are young, single people are actually more negative than coupled people in their views of single targets. When the perceivers are older, though, the trend reverses. For example, older singles think single people are more sophisticated and sociable than married people; in contrast, older coupled people think it is the marrieds who are more sophisticated and sociable than the singles. For perceptions of warmth and caring, single perceivers are harsher in their perceptions than coupled perceivers only if they are men.

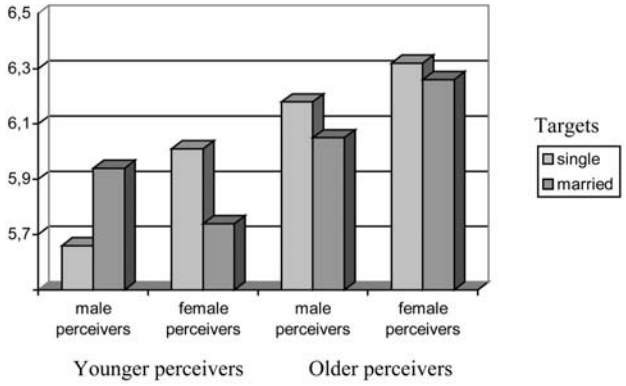
Do men judge singles differently than women do? Are there other ways in which men judge singles differently than women do? Results for the measure of sophistication and sociability indicate that there are (see Figure 2). The two-way interaction of perceiver sex and target status was significant, $F(1, 250) = 4.04$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 = 0.02$. Again, it is the men who are more negative in their views of targets who are single. Men think that single people are less sophisticated and sociable than married people (*Ms* = 5.92 and 6.00). In contrast, women think that single people are more sophisticated and sociable than married people (see Figure 2; *Ms* = 6.16 and 6.00).

Figure 2 Do men judge singles different than women do?
Perceptions by perceiver and targert characteristics

a) Perception as miserable and lonely



b) Perception as sophisticated and sociable



However, not all men judge single people more harshly than married people. Age matters, too (for the interaction of perceiver age, perceiver sex, and target status, $F(1, 250) = 6.65$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = 0.03$). It is only the younger men who think that single people are less sophisticated and sociable than married people. The older men think singles are more sophisticated and sociable than marrieds. Both the younger and the older women view singles as at least a bit more sophisticated and sociable than marrieds; the difference (favoring single targets) is greater for the younger female perceivers than the older ones.

We noted previously that all groups of perceivers believe that single people are more miserable and lonely than married people. However, the degree to which perceivers see singles as lonelier than marrieds depends on whether the perceiver is male or female and whether the target is male or female. Men see a smaller difference between singles and marrieds when they are judging women than when they are judging other men (see Figure 2).

Discussion

Are single people viewed differently than people who are married? Clearly, they are. Single people are seen as more miserable and lonely than married people, and as less warm and caring. Singles were viewed more negatively in these ways regardless of whether the single targets were described as 25-years old or 40-years old, and regardless of whether the perceivers were younger or older, male or female, single or coupled. All that differed was the degree to which the singles were perceived more harshly than the marrieds.

There was far less agreement on whether singles or marrieds are more sophisticated and sociable. Women – especially younger women – think single people are more sophisticated and sociable than married people. Younger men disagree. Coupled perceivers sometimes rate singles as more sophisticated and sociable than marrieds, but only if they are young or the targets they are rating are young.

Our results are not as optimistic as we hoped. Nevertheless, there seems to be light at the end of the tunnel. The stereotypes about singles seem less pervasive than they were years ago. They are qualified with respect to perceiver characteristics and with respect to target age. This tendency for positive aspects corresponds to greater opportunities for single people to lead full and rewarding lives. The changing place of singles in society is especially evident for women. Compared to decades ago, women have more job opportunities, which afford them greater economic independence[4]. Many women can support themselves, and even some children, without relying on a husband. Because of changing attitudes and the availability of birth control, the links between having sex, having children, and being married are no longer as strong as they once were. Perhaps these societal changes are contributing to the perceptions of singles – at least among some segments of the population – as sophisticated (self-assured, independent, intelligent, interesting, adventurous, career-oriented) and sociable (outgoing, has lots of friends, happy, attractive, and in love with life).

The changes in society have probably had a greater impact on the lives of single women than those of single men. Yet we found relatively few differences in perceptions of the male targets as compared to the female targets. In fact, just one interaction involving the sex and status of the target person was significant. It showed that male perceivers were even more negative in their judgments of the loneliness of single men (compared to married men) than single women. Sex differences, in the few instances when we found them, were more likely to characterize the perceivers than the targets. Except among the older perceivers, it was usually the men who were harsher than the women in their views of the single targets.

Why the negativity?

The prevailing belief about people who are single is that they "don't have anyone" (DePaulo, 2006). If this were true – if single people really did not have any important people in their lives – then they would surely be lonely. But, as careful reviews of the science of happiness and loneliness have shown (e.g., DePaulo, 2006; DePaulo & Morris, 2005), differences in well-being between single and married people are usually small, may have nothing to do with getting married (see especially, Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2003), and do not always favor people who are married. What people mean when they say that singles "don't have anyone" is that they do not have a spouse. But human connectedness is not such a narrow construct. People can care about, feel connected to, and feel loved by, many different kinds of people (e.g., friends, siblings, parents, children), not just people with whom they have a romantic relationship. That is an important reason why the actual differences between single and married people in their well-being are not as unfavorable to singles as many people believe.

As we noted, the participants in our study believed that single people were more miserable and lonely, and less warm and caring, than married people. What is also important is that they believed that gap got wider with age. That is, they believed

4 The social system of the former GDR may have been an exception.

that at age forty, single people are even more miserable and lonely (compared to married people), and even less warm and caring, than they were at age twenty-five. We need far more longitudinal research to understand the trajectories of people's lives, and how those trajectories differ depending on whether people are single or married/coupled. However, from what we do know now, the belief that single people (compared to married people) become even less contented with their lives as they enter middle age, may be exactly wrong – at least for women (DePaulo, 2006). How can this be?

People in contemporary society who get married, or become involved in a serious coupled relationship, often devote much of their time, emotion, and affections to just one person – their partner. Over the years, other people, such as friends, sometimes become less important to them. However, people who are single – particularly single women – sometimes maintain a whole convoy of people, such as friends and relatives, who are important to them (see, for example, Trimberger, 2005). Many single women are not as vulnerable to the insecurities of depending mostly on just one other person for friendship and caring.

Single people were also seen as less warm and caring than married people. The variables that comprised the "warm and caring" factor – warm-hearted, fond of children, emotionally open, caring, responsible, tolerant, and willing to compromise – suggest a certain nurturance, as may seem typical (or stereotypical) of people who have children. Perhaps the perception of singles as less nurturant than marrieds corresponds to the actual likelihood of having children. Married people are more likely to have children than single people are. Yet, that difference is narrowing, as more married people remain childless, and more single people do have children. Moreover, the actual link between being a parent and being nurturant may be less strong than many people believe. There are many ways to be nurturant other than being warm and caring toward your own children, and there are many parents who are not so warm and caring toward their children.

Are couples especially harsh in their judgments of single people?

The question of whether coupled people judge single people more harshly than single people do does not have a simple answer. Sometimes single people are more negative in their judgments of single people (relative to married people), and sometimes coupled people are more negative. It depends on the trait that is being judged, the age of the targets, and the age of the perceivers. Although the details may seem complicated, the bottom line is not. Negative perceptions of singles are not specific to people who are coupled. Single people sometimes judge other singles just as harshly, or even more so, than couples do.

If couples were uniformly more negative than single people in their views of singles, then we could interpret our findings as an example of prejudice toward an outgroup and favoritism toward an in-group. But the findings for two of the variables in particular (miserable and lonely, and warm and caring) suggest something much more sweeping. As DePaulo and Morris (2005) have argued, there seems to be an ideology of marriage and family that is widely embraced and infrequently questioned. The ideology holds that a sexual partnership is the one truly important peer

relationship, and that partnered people are happier and lead more meaningful lives than people who are single.

Our findings also suggest that the ideology is finally being challenged. A number of subgroups, such as younger women and older singles, believe that single people are more sophisticated and sociable than people who are married. We do not mean to imply that progress would occur if prejudices against singles were replaced with prejudices against coupled persons, especially marrieds (this is the group of coupled people studied here but results may be similar with other groups of coupled people). Instead, we would like to see perceptions of singles and couples (especially marrieds) correspond more faithfully to the actual texture of single and coupled (especially married) people's lives. However, it is also likely that perceptions of singles versus coupled persons who are not married differ from those of marrieds. This needs to be found out in following studies.

Conclusion

Our results showed that age and gender are factors that moderate the stereotype of singles. We showed that there is a positive trend in the way singles are perceived, but only with respect to young singles. Age seems to be crucial when the implications of a person's status are evaluated. Apparently, being young, flexible, and independent is regarded as positive, being old and still without a partner as negative. Many people may have internalized these cultural expectations (one has to be married or at least has to have a romantic partner at the age of 35) and judge others and oneself in relation to these standards. It is true that singleness is still regarded and commonly accepted as a transitional state at a younger age. A forty-year-old single is much more stigmatized than a 25-year-old one. Further research should differentiate in more detail the status of being single as there is so much diversity within that group.

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