

Single and Happy

It's the norm, not the exception

By Bella DePaulo

I'm fifty-four years old and I have always been single. I love my single life. But for a long time I rarely said that out loud. I thought I was the only happy single person.

I didn't love everything about my single life. I didn't like that "poor thing" look I'd get when others first learned that I was single. I didn't like their assumption that I must be miserable and lonely and pining for a partner.

There were other things I didn't like that I thought I could pin on my single status, but I wasn't really sure. For example, sometimes at work colleagues with partners would assume that I could cover the tasks that no one else wanted. Maybe they presumed that since I was single, I didn't have a life and so had nothing better to do with my time. Socially, I was invited to lunch with my coupled colleagues during the week but not to their dinner and movie outings over the weekends.

Tentatively at first, I began asking other single people if they thought they were viewed and treated differently than coupled people just because they were single. The responses were overwhelming. It was time to proceed beyond anecdotes.

Years later after I had read hundreds of scientific studies about marital status, happiness, and discrimination, and after I conducted my own program of research, I realized that much of the conventional wisdom about people who are single was either grossly exaggerated or just plain wrong. The place of singles in society and the significance of getting married have changed dramatically over the past decades. But our views of single and married people have not yet caught up. I wrote about this in my book *Singled Out: How Singles Are Stereotyped, Stigmatized, and Ignored, and Still Live Happily Ever After*. The subtitle captures what I learned about singles. Let me explain.

After collecting stories of singlehood, informally, from hundreds of others, I began conducting systematic research. My colleague Wendy Morris and I first studied perceptions of people who are single and married. We approached this work in a number of ways. In one set of studies, for instance, we created profiles of married and single people that were exactly the same (in terms of the person's age, hometown, interests, employment, and so forth) except for their marital status. In one experiment after another, we found that the single people were viewed more negatively than the married people. For example, they were seen as unhappy, lonely, and self-centered compared to their married counterparts. (The one exception is that single people were consistently viewed as more independent than married people.)

We looked up federal statutes and found more than a thousand instances in which official marriage was linked to federal protections and benefits. We found discrimination against singles in the workplace and the marketplace. We then did research of our own on discrimination and found that realtors (and other people we asked) would prefer to rent to married couples than to single women, single men, unmarried couples, or a pair of friends—even when they all had equally positive references and ability to pay. They even preferred the married couple to the unmarried couple when the unmarried couple had been together six years, compared to only six months for the married couple.

The story that was taking shape in my mind was becoming clear. Single people are not as happy as married people in part because they are targets of stereotyping and discrimination.

At first I did not doubt that getting married made people happier. I saw indications of that in headlines and book titles. In fact, the assumption had become so much a part of conventional wisdom that some began to build other arguments on that foundation. In an op-ed in *The New York Times*, for instance, Jonathan Rauch argued that gay men and lesbians should be allowed to marry because social science research shows that marriage makes people happier.

When I set out to study the research on marital status and happiness, I thought I was looking for nuances—are there some people who benefit from marriage even more than others? I was amazed by what I found.

In the typical study people in different categories are asked to rate their happiness, perhaps on a 1 to 4 scale, with 4 indicating “very happy”. The categories usually include people who are single (and always have been), currently married, divorced, or widowed. Here are the results of one such study by Walter R. Gove and Hee-Choon Shin published in 1989; the numbers are the average happiness ratings of 2,200 Americans in the four groups:

3.3 currently married
3.2 single
2.9 divorced
2.9 widowed

The first thing to notice is that all four groups are on the happy end of the scale. They are all closer to calling themselves a 3 in happiness (the scale point that has the label “pretty happy”) than to any other label. Second, the differences between the groups are not impressive, and the smallest difference is between those who are currently married and those who have always been single.

I’m mentioning this particular study because it is based on a nationally representative sample and because it is often cited by scholars who claim that getting married makes people happier. They look at numbers like these and say, “Look, the married people are happier than all of the unmarried people.” But even if the differences were much greater than they actually are, we still could not say for sure that getting married is what made the married people happier. Maybe they were already happier when they were single, and getting married didn’t change anything. Also, why not compare all of the people who had ever been married to the people who had never been married? In that comparison, the people who had ever experienced marriage would have an average happiness rating of about 3.0, lower than the 3.2 of the people who had always been single.

A better answer to the question of whether getting married makes people happier would come from studying people over the course of their lives, to see whether people who get married become happier than they were before. Professor Richard Lucas of Michigan State University has been analyzing data from just such a study. Thousands of Germans have been asked about their happiness once a year, every year, starting at age sixteen. The study has been ongoing for more than eighteen years. Lucas followed people who got married and stayed married over the course of the study, people who stayed single the entire time, and people who married and then became divorced or widowed.

Consistent with the study I described previously (in which people were asked about their happiness just once), both the married and the single people were solidly on the happy end of the scale. In this type of study it is possible to look back at the people who got married and stayed married to see how happy they were when they were single.

On the average, people who stayed single the whole time had a happiness rating of 7.0. (In this study, people rated their happiness on a scale ranging from 0 to 10.) On the other hand, married people had a happiness rating of 7.2 when they were single. What happened once they married? Around the year of the wedding, they enjoyed a brief blip in happiness. On the average, they became about .25 points happier than they were before. But after that honeymoon period was over, they went back to being as happy or as unhappy as they had been when they were single. So getting married did not transform them from miserable single people into blissfully wedded couples!

Moreover, the small increment in happiness around the time of the wedding occurred only for those who got married and stayed married. Those who would eventually divorce became slightly less happy as the time of the wedding approached.

So single people typically are happy, and getting married does not make people lastingly happier, even for those who get married and stay married. How can this be? Single people do not have the official, legal coupled status that is so celebrated in our society—and many are not part of any couple, formal or informal, same-sex or different-sex. Plus, they are targets of stereotyping and discrimination. Why aren't they miserable and lonely?

The ways we have come to talk about people who are single is misleading. We often say, for example, that they are “alone” and that they “don't have anyone”. In fact, though, single people (perhaps especially single women) are likely to have whole networks of important people in their lives. They often have friendships that have outlasted many marriages. They have not invested all of their emotional and interpersonal capital into just one person.

Decades ago there was a big bright line separating married life from single life—a line that was especially daunting to women. Singles often felt that they could not have sex or children outside of marriage without experiencing stigma and shame. The Food and Drug Administration did not approve the pill until 1960. Before then, having sex entailed a greater risk of pregnancy. Now women can have sex without having children, and because of advances in medical reproductive science, they can have children without having sex. Marriage is no longer essential to any of it.

Even though women are still sometimes paid less than men for the same work, there are more jobs and better jobs open to women than there were decades ago. That means that women are no longer tethered to husbands for economic life support. Many can support themselves and even some children on their own paychecks.

There is a remarkable new demographic reality: Americans now spend more years of their adult lives unmarried than married. There are currently fewer households comprised of mom, dad, and the kids than of single people living solo.

Increasingly, people who are single are living their lives fully. Those who have the resources to do so are buying homes, traveling the world, and pursuing their passions. Their lives are meaningful—and yes, they are happy.



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