

Appreciating the Complex World of Bachelors

"Lifelong bachelors" (heterosexual men who are at least 40 years old and have never married) have long been the subject of public scrutiny. Usually this attention builds on myths and stereotypes about these men, seeing them as losers, mama's boys, unattractive, fixated on a parent, workaholics, sexually repressed or wild playboys, woman-haters, or a threat to marriage. If positive attention is given them, it is usually that bachelors can be "self-made men."

That they fall outside the statistical norm is one explanation for these negative views. More than 90% of men in the U.S. are married (at least once) by age 40, and the likelihood of men getting married for the first time after age 40 is low. However, just because these men fall outside the statistical "norm" doesn't mean they are necessarily abnormal. Another explanation for these negative views is the way questions about them are asked, typically, "What is wrong with these guys?" Framed in the negative, these kinds of questions leave little room for viewing these men in anything but an unfavorable way.

In my book *Bachelors: The Psychology of Men Who Haven't Married*, I explode many simplistic myths about these men. Instead, I show how bachelor stereotypes are either blatantly false or gross oversimplifications of a reality that is far richer and more complex than social scientists and the general public imagine.

For my book, I reviewed existing psychological and sociological theories and research about men who choose not to marry. From this material, I formulated my own interview protocol, and applied standardized psychological tests. Next I recruited 30 men from a wide socio-economic strata with whom I met with for 2 or 3 assessment interviews which lasted between 3 to 5 hours each. What resulted in my report was that bachelors are more varied and complex than can be explained by any single cause. The men I studied in depth each had their own story to tell. Their unique

approaches came through in revealing interviews about their lives and loves. The different life paths these men have taken impacts why they have not married at an age when most of their peers have. Compare the highly introspective economics professor with the highly active multi-millionaire entrepreneur. The socially isolated third-shift custodian contrasts with the teacher with a part-time job as a travel agent. The chemist who has never dated a woman seriously is markedly different from the teacher who has been in a committed relationship for 16 years.

As different as they are, however, as a group, they share certain common patterns in their style of relating to their worlds. For one thing, independence and self-reliance were high priorities among these men. As a result they adopted and became particularly comfortable with certain common life patterns. I identified three patterns: avoidance, isolation of feelings, and distortion. I observed avoidance in both subtle and obvious ways, in interpersonal relationships through passivity and complacency. In many cases these men were reluctant to get involved, make demands, or assert their needs in sexual expression, career undertaking, and significant relationships. They also had adopted a personal style of not fully exploring or expressing their feelings. While this defensive process permitted interaction with others, it sometimes cut off and repressed emotions. Emotional containment took the form of standoffishness, indifference, and estrangement from anxiety-producing events. The most overt isolation pattern of being completely detached from others appears in only a handful of bachelors, but the majority tend to be quite low key in expressing hopes, desires and wishes to others. Distortion was noted in their highly individual styles of responding to a psychological task: Their style was to view tasks in a way different than the way most others would view them, a pattern that apparently arose from looking for a quick solution to a complex problem.

The most profound and important finding in my work was the different degree of reliance on and entrenchment in these personality patterns that the whole "bachelor" group shows. In this regard, three styles or patterns emerged from my investigations. I saw men who were: "Flexible and Satisfied," "Entrenched and Satisfied," and "Conflicted and Dissatisfied."

These clusters describe the degree to which the three patterns of relating were utilized and the level of comfort these men achieved through their use.

The "Flexible and Satisfied" cluster (20%) found their activities fulfilling. These men had a great number of relationships that were important to them throughout their adulthood, and described these relationships in terms of love and affection as well as sharing mutual interests. They tended to be successful in a career they enjoy. Although they got along well with others, extended interdependence appeared to be somewhat threatening to them. Feelings of dependency, neediness, and love, were difficult for these men to tolerate. The avoidance and emotional isolation practiced by these men seemed to evolve more from seeing themselves as independent rather than as a reaction to, and pulling away from, the people around them. These men showed facility in lowering their defenses when they chose: They could be open, assertive, and engaging at times. They reported having meaningful friendships with men, as well as relationships with girlfriends, that lasted a number of years. They also were more likely than the other bachelor groups to describe the emotional connection they felt to these people who were obviously important to them. Flexible bachelors also tended to be more successful financially and in their careers than men in the other bachelor groups. These are the bachelors who would make "a good catch" if they decided to make marriage a personal priority. However, they were still unlikely to get married because of the appeal they see in independence. If they do get married, however, bachelors who are "flexible" are most likely to be happily married.

A second cluster, the "Entrenched and Satisfied" men (30%) unlike the first, achieved satisfaction through a certain rigidity in their personality patterns resulting in diminished social relations. They had few friends, and their descriptions of these friendships were lacking warmth and tenderness. These bachelors withdrew from their feelings, defining their relationships in terms of instrumental activities they shared rather than deep emotional ties they felt. These "entrenched bachelors" were vague about their goals, indecisive about their actions, passive in their undertakings, and can have a self-absorbed detachment from others. At the same time these entrenched bachelors were satisfied with their lives and their undertakings. Though

they did not fit the mainstream of what others would describe as rich and productive lives, they were not seeking to make changes. Entrenched bachelors are the men who probably come closest to the traditional negative bachelor stereotypes of being repressed, withdrawn, socially awkward individuals.

The third cluster of bachelors, "Conflicted and Dissatisfied," consisted of half of the men in my sample. These men were disappointed with their limitations in relating to others, several openly lamenting the fact that they continued to be single. It was indicative of their troublesome feelings that most of these men had been involved in psychotherapy. The "Conflicted" bachelors employed the personality patterns of avoidance and emotional isolation to about the same degree as the other men in this study. However, their day-to-day relations did not succeed in warding off anxiety, led to conflicted feelings, and did not maintain these men at the level of functioning they wished. The conflicts for these individuals came from their competing desires to be close to a woman, and also a reluctance to do so.

Two qualitatively different experiences accompanied the mixed feelings among the men in the "Conflicted" cluster. One came from strong feelings of anger and resentment which made them skeptical and untrusting in relationships. The other experience arose from personal insecurities, low confidence, and fears of incompetence. Having grown up with feelings of hurt, resentment, and anger, about half of the conflicted bachelors attempted to control these feelings by being on their own. Connecting with others threatened their control. These men had underlying concerns about abandonment and loss. The other "Conflicted" bachelors grew up in families which they described as pleasant, pleasurable, and comfortable. Commitment to a relationship for these men aroused fears of making a major, uncorrectable mistake. Part of the fear of making a mistake included the need to be true to oneself and the need to "keep options open." In addition, fears of making a mistake were sometimes related to the limited skills these men thought they had in relating to others.

Although presented briefly here, the varied experiences in the world of bachelors is complex and fascinating. For a certain kind of man, permanent

single status is a viable -- and indeed often quite preferable -- alternative to marriage. These men can be happy, successful and feel actualized. The goal of my work has been to study the multiple ways bachelors approach their journey so that the men who choose not to get married (and the women who become involved with them) can make more informed personal choices. In this regard, my book has sections on the many advantages and disadvantages of being single. There is also a section about how bachelors might make the best use of psychotherapy should they choose to add this experience to their personal journey.

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