TARGET ARTICLE

Singles in Society and in Science

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We suggest that single adults in contemporary American society are targets of stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination, a phenomenon we will call singlism. Singlism is an outgrowth of a largely uncontested set of beliefs, the Ideology of Marriage and Family. Its premises include the assumptions that the sexual partnership is the one truly important peer relationship and that people who have such partnerships are happier and more fulfilled than those who do not. We use published claims about the greater happiness of married people to illustrate how the scientific enterprise seems to be influenced by the ideology. We propose that people who are single—particularly women who have always been single—fare better than the ideology would predict because they do have positive, enduring, and important interpersonal relationships. The persistence of singlism is especially puzzling considering that actual differences based on civil (marital) status seem to be qualified and small, the number of singles is growing, and sensitivity to other varieties of prejudice is acute. By way of explanation, we consider arguments from evolutionary psychology, attachment theory, a social problems perspective, the growth of the cult of the couple, and the appeal of an ideology that offers a simple and compelling worldview.

We are writing this article in hopes of starting a conversation about people who are single and their place in society and in science. We think that in popular discourse as well as in scientific writings, a set of comfortable habits of the mind have settled in without anyone much noticing. These habits quietly shape social interactions, personal experiences, and public policies. In science, they have come to guide the kinds of questions we ask, the kinds of studies we conduct, the way we report our results, and the kinds of stories we tell about our results. They may also have a hand in the questions we do not ask, the studies we do not conduct, the results we do not report, and the stories we do not tell about our results. Our comfortable mental habits lull us into telling familiar tales, without first subjecting those stories to the same level of critical scrutiny that characterizes most of the rest of our work.

When we talk about people who are single and their place in society, we will initially focus primarily on contemporary American singles. Eventually, though, we will argue that the social science of singles, at its best, will be a broad-ranging, multidisciplinary endeavor, and that historical and cross-cultural perspectives will be an essential part of it.

The Ideology of Marriage and Family

Some of the familiar tales that we tell seem so innocuous, and so self-evident, that critical appraisal seems unnecessary. For example, Americans seem to assume that *just about everyone wants to marry, and just about everyone does*. Why not assume this? In the United States, marriage (or, for those who eschew the institution or are eschewed by it, serious coupling) is still a step along the normative life path. Over the course of a lifetime, the percentage of adults who ever do marry at some point is quite high—at least 90%, and maybe higher (Connidis, 2001).

The assumption that just about everyone yearns for a sexual partnership (the term we will use for a serious sex-linked relationship) melds mindlessly into the next presumption, that *a sexual partnership is the one truly important peer relationship*. That presumption, in turn, is propped up by another set of assumptions about people who have that one truly important relationship, and how they compare to people who do not. *Those who have a sexual partnership are better people—more valuable, worthy, and important. Compared to people who do not have the peer relationship that counts, they are probably happier, less lonely, and more mature, and their lives are probably more meaningful and more complete.*

We have just described some of the premises of what we will call the Ideology of Marriage and Family. The premises we have spelled out are the ones pertaining to marriage, and the ones we will focus on most intently in this article. The family premises are analogous. Americans assume not only that just about everyone wants to marry and does so but also that just about everyone wants to marry and have children, and just about everyone does that, too. They assume that the parent–child relationship is the one truly important intergenerational relationship. They further assume that adults who marry and have children are better people who are happier, less lonely, and more mature, and leading more meaningful and more complete lives than those who do not marry and have children.

In a society in which a largely uncontested Ideology of Marriage and Family thrives, so, too, does a culture of intensive coupling, intensive parenting, and intensive nuclearity. With so many of life's rewards presumably located in coupling, parenting, and nuclear family, Americans look ever more intently in those directions. Couples expect to find happiness and meaningfulness in each other and in their children. They invest their time, attention, emotions, and resources in their own marriage and family to an extent probably unprecedented in the nation's history (e.g., Gillis, 1996; Hays, 1996). Sources of joy, identity, and meaning that once loomed large in people's lives—such as friends, community, and kin, as well as passion in the pursuit of great causes–are now mostly asides (e.g., we're "just" friends) or quaint bits of nostalgia (e.g., those 1960s flower children). Even work, long a central domain for men, is now sometimes described as if it were of little significance relative to marriage and family, regardless of the place it actually has in men's lives (DePaulo, 2006).

Our claim is not that the premises of the ideology are necessarily false. To varying degrees, they may or may not be. Our point is instead that the ideology has gone largely unrecognized and uncontested. The premises are simply assumed, rather than (when possible) subjected to a fair test. As a result, promising lines of thinking are rarely pursued. Moreover, even when an area of research seems to comprise a direct test of one of the ideological premises—for example, that adults who are married are happier than adults who are not married—the ideology's invisible hand is still shaping the science. We hope the position we spell out in this article, however wrong or incomplete it may be in its details, will contribute in the long run to a science that is broader, deeper, more imaginative, and more rigorous.

Our Plan for This Article

First, we will define who counts as single, and then document the dramatic growth in the number of singles. We also comment on the place of singles in current cultural debates. We then review evidence indicating that singles are targets of stereotyping and of discrimination often practiced without compunction or even awareness.

In the next section, we examine in detail the claims made by renowned psychologists about the greater happiness of people who are married. In doing so, we illustrate the ways in which our science seems to be shaped by the Ideology of Marriage and Family. We argue that the actual relationship between civil status and happiness is likely to be smaller and more qualified than either the ideology or the claims of scientists suggest. But if singles are the targets of a largely uncontested ideology that stigmatizes them, then why aren't they miserable? We address that, too.

We also ask why singlism persists at a time when the number of singles is increasing dramatically and sensitivity to other forms of prejudice is acute. We consider possible arguments from evolutionary psychology and attachment theory about the unique importance of sexual partnerships. We also discuss the social problems perspective (from sociology) and the rise of what we will call the cult of the couple. We suggest that the Ideology of Marriage and Family, like many other ideologies, persists because it offers a simple and satisfying worldview.

Singles in Contemporary American Society

Who Counts as Single?

Stigmatized Right From the Start

The first hint that singles are stigmatized appears in the most basic task of defining singles. Singles are defined in terms of who they are not, what they do not have. They are "unmarried." The designation is odd, in that it is singlehood that comes first and is then undone (if it is undone) by marriage. So why aren't married people called unsingle? Legally, singles are adults who

are not officially married. Socially, singles are people who are not seriously coupled.

Legal and Bureaucratic Distinctions

In U.S. Census Bureau reports, different taxonomies of civil status are used, but the standard reporting format includes four categories: divorced, widowed, "never married," and married. That fourfold scheme answers three questions: Are you currently married? If not, were you ever married? If so, are you "unmarried" because your spouse died or because you divorced? Adults who are currently single have to explain themselves. In contrast, those who are currently married need not indicate whether they have always been in the same marriage, or whether they are in the process of dissolving their union.

Social and Personal Distinctions

In everyday life, there is one distinction that typically matters: Are you in a sexual partnership or not? The sexual part refers to the component that is conventionally associated with the relationship, even if it has not yet been realized or if the realization is a distant memory. At the same time, sex alone is not definitional. A one night stand is not a sexual partnership—it is just a fling.

By calling a relationship a partnership we mean that the couple is serious. Officially married people automatically qualify. Otherwise, there are no precise criteria for seriousness, only clues (e.g., Has the couple been together for a long time? Do they seem to expect to stay together? Are they living together?) Personal coupled status (whether people regard themselves as seriously coupled) and social coupled status (whether others regard a person as seriously coupled) can differ, and that distinction can be important, but it is not a distinction that we will pursue in this article.

The type of sexual relationship is irrelevant to whether a particular relationship is a sexual partnership—same-sex, heterosexual, and transgendered can all qualify. Of course, the social and personal implications of different kinds of sexual relationships can be profound, but here we are dealing only with definitions.

The Rising Tide of Singles

As of 2002, there were 86 million single adults in the United States. These singles are part of a dramatic trend that has been building for decades. In 1970, for example, there were only 38 million adults 18 or older who were divorced, widowed, or had always been single. They comprised about 28% of the adult population, a chunk that has grown steadily to more than 40% (see Table 1).

Of the many kinds of households, such as single person households, single parent households, married couples without children, and groups of unrelated individuals, the one central in our cultural imagination is the household comprised of a married couple and their children. In 1970, about 40% of all households were of that type, compared to just 17% of single-person households. Over the decades, however, the percent of married with children households declined and the single person households increased, to the point that there are now more single-person households than married with children (see Table 2). This is so despite the fact that most single people do not live alone.

When we describe the growing number of singles in American society, there is a question we are predictably asked in response: Yes, but aren't many of those single people cohabiting? It is true that some people who are not married are living as married, and that their numbers are rising. Still, by 2002, they accounted for only 11 million of the 86 million "single" adults. We have never been asked the parallel question: Aren't many of the people who are officially married and living together, actually functioning in just about every other way as if they were, or wish they were, single?

A statistic that may be even more important than all of the ones we have described is this: On the average, Americans now spend more years of their adult lives single than married. A number of trends are contributing to the new reality in which it is marriage, rather than singlehood, that is transitional (and only for those who do marry). For example, the median age at first marriage has been increasing steadily since 1956 (the lowest point in records dating back to 1890), the rate of divorce remains high,

Table 1. *Civil Status of Population Ages 18 and Older (Numbers in Millions) From Census Bureau Reports*

| Year | Total | Married | Singles | Types of Singles | | |
				Always Single	Widowed	Divorced
2002	209.3	123.2 (58.9%)	86.0 (41.1%)	51.1 (24.4%)	14.0 (6.7%)	20.9 (10%)
2000	201.8	120.1 (59.5%)	81.6 (40.5%)	48.2 (23.9%)	13.7 (6.8%)	19.8 (9.8%)
1990	181.8	112.6 (61.9%)	69.2 (38.1%)	40.4 (22.2%)	13.8 (7.6%)	15.1 (8.3%)
1980	159.5	104.6 (65.5%)	54.9 (34.5%)	32.3 (20.3%)	12.7 (8.0%)	9.9 (6.2%)
1970	132.5	95.0 (71.7%)	37.5 (28.3%)	21.4 (16.2%)	11.8 (8.9%)	4.3 (3.2%)

Notes. From U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, P20-547, "Marital Status of the Population by Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin: 1990 to 2002" and earlier reports.

and life expectancy is increasing. Women are less likely to remarry than are men, and they also live longer, so they typically spend more years single than do men.

Singles, Culture Wars, and Public Policy

As we write this article (in the spring of 2004), the United States is in the grip of an intense and divisive cultural debate. The Supreme Court of Massachusetts recently declared that gay people have a constitutional right to marriage, and allowing access only to something short of marriage (such as civil unions) is a violation of that right. Soon thereafter, officials in San Francisco, and then in a growing number of other communities, began to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples. At the same time, various state legislatures began proceedings to outlaw gay marriages in their own state constitutions. President George W. Bush soon entered the fray with a call to federal legislators to begin the process of amending the Constitution of the United States so as to declare that marriage can only be a union of a man and a woman. This was after he had already spearheaded a $1.5 billion initiative to promote marriage among the poor.

For us to suggest, in this context, that the Ideology of Marriage and Family is largely uncontested may seem baffling. We stand by our suggestion because we see all of the wrangling occurring on the ideology's own turf. The cultural debate is not about the value that should or should not be accorded to marriage. The $1.5 billion program rests on the presumption that marriage is an obvious good. The debate is only about who should count as married. Left unquestioned is the assumption that any person should be accorded any special privileges, or suffer any penalties, simply because they are coupled.

It may also seem odd of us to proclaim a culture of intensive coupling, intensive parenting, and intensive nuclearity at a time when the proportion of singles is growing, the proportion of all couples who choose not to have children is growing, and the proportion of traditional nuclear families (two biological parents and their minor children) is declining. Our guess about this

Table 2. *Trends in Types of Household (Numbers in Thousands)*

| Year | Total Households | Two Types of Households | |
		Married With Children	One Person
2000	104,705	25,248 (24.1%)	26,724 (25.5%)
1990	93,347	24,537 (26.3%)	22,999 (24.6%)
1980	80,776	24,961 (30.9%)	18,296 (22.6%)
1970	63,401	25,541 (40.3%)	10,851 (17.1%)

Notes. From U.S. Census Bureau (2001), Current Population Reports, Series P20-537, "America's Families and Living Arrangements: Population Characteristics."

is that the culture of intensive coupling, parenting, and nuclearity is taking root not despite the contrary demographic trends, but because of them. The changing demographic face of the nation challenges fundamental beliefs and values—the ideology we live by; those sorts of threats send us clinging, ever more tightly, to old familiar worldviews we hope will help us feel safe.

Singlism in Society

One of the most important implications of the Ideology of Marriage and Family is that adults who are single in contemporary American society are a stigmatized group. As such, they are targets of negative stereotyping, interpersonal rejection, economic disadvantage, and discrimination (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998). We refer to this antisingles sentiment as *singlism*. Is your first reaction to our blunt statement one of skepticism? That's what we expect if we are right about the uncontested status of the ideology. We believe that the stigma against people who are single is mostly unrecognized. When instances of possible discrimination are described, we expect them to be interpreted as legitimate, reasonable, and fair.

Are Singles the Targets of Negative Stereotypes?

Stanton Peele (1988) described contemporary American society as a culture in which we

> hold out the possibility of falling in love as a life solution, where love is seen as a transcendent experience and as a rite of passage into adulthood, and where social life is organized almost entirely around being with the one you love. (pp. 120–121)

People who are socially single, we think, are perceived as missing out on all of this. Without the transcendent experience of being in love, single people are presumed to be leading sadder and less exciting lives than people who are coupled. People who have not made the journey to adulthood that romantic love entails are by definition less mature than people who have. Locked out of the life of couples, singles are also likely to be regarded as lonely and deprived of adventures and fun. If singles are accorded any saving grace, it may be their perceived independence and the potential that entails for pursuing careers and other life interests.

The stigma of singlehood is different from many other stigmas that have been studied in its link to the life cycle. There are age norms for developmental life tasks such as marrying and having children (e.g., Neugarten, 1976). Perhaps, then, adults grow into the stigma of singlehood only as they approach the time at which others expect them to be married. Young singles

may not be perceived any more negatively than young married people.

Although life cycles are becoming more fluid, people are still at risk for being judged harshly if they do not reach developmental milestones on the timetable set by the social clock (defined by prevailing cultural norms). Krueger and his colleagues showed this in a study in which all stimulus persons were described as married parents, but varied in whether they were early, on time, or delayed in marrying and having children (Krueger, Heckhausen, & Hundertmark, 1995). Perceivers thought the life situations of the delayed targets were more under their control, and more attributable to their personalities, than were the situations of the early or on-time targets. When the delayed targets were women, perceivers also rated them as less likable and less likely to be satisfied with their lives.

The suggestion from the Krueger et al. (1995) study that marrying "on time" is perceived as controllable is important. Potentially stigmatizing conditions, such as obesity or homosexuality, elicit more negative reactions when perceivers think the condition is controllable than when they do not (e.g., Crandall & Martinez, 1996; Whitley, 1990). We think that marriage is culturally construed as an achievement that can be attained by just about anyone, and which should be attained by a certain point in adulthood. It is, in many ways, what the landing of a full-time job has traditionally represented for men. Several parallels are pertinent. First, as in finding a job, the timetable for marrying is not firm; it can be delayed, with little risk of stigma, for a number of years for culturally acceptable reasons, such as the pursuit of more education or training. Second, in that both jobs and marriages are construed as achievements, both also require evidence of relevant attitudes, attributes, or skills. People who seem to be demonstrating or acquiring job-related (or marriage-related) qualities will be regarded more approvingly than those who do not seem to be doing so, even if the time for stepping into a full-time job or a marriage has not yet arrived. With regard to coupling, the implication is that adults not yet at the age when they are expected to be married will still be subject to negative perceptions to the extent that they lack experience in romantic relationships. Finally, those who have held a job or a marriage at one point will be viewed more favorably than those of similar circumstances (e.g., age) who have never done so; this will be true even if the job or the marriage ended unsuccessfully. In short, adults who are divorced will be perceived in some ways less negatively than comparable adults who have always been single. That's because the "achievement" of a marriage—even one that does not last—demonstrates that they have what it takes to attain that developmental milestone.

Harsh Judgments of Singles: The Evidence

In our first study of perceptions of singles, we asked nearly 1,000 college students to think about either single people or married people and to list the characteristics that came to mind (Morris, DePaulo, Hertel, & Ritter, 2004). As we expected, participants were more likely to describe married people as happy, loving, and secure. They also described married people as kind, caring, and giving; faithful and loyal; compromising; reliable; and dependent (see Table 3).

When describing singles, participants were more likely to use traits such as lonely, shy, unhappy, insecure, and inflexible. Participants also described singles as flirtatious and looking for a partner. As we anticipated, singles were very likely to be described as independent. They were also more often described as sociable, friendly, and fun than were married people (see Table 3).

In our next experiments, we provided the traits to be rated and the rating scales and manipulated a series of theoretically important variables. In the first two studies, the target person was described as single or married, male or female, and 25 or 40 years old. In one study, the participants (raters) were college students, and in the other, they were adults from the community, about half of whom were single and half married. Finally, in a third study, the target persons were all described as college students and we manipulated whether they were currently in a relationship or not and whether they had ever been in a relationship or not.

Table 3. *Percentage of Participants Who Mentioned Each Characteristic When Describing Single or Married Targets (Morris, DePaulo, Hertel & Ritter, 2004)*

Characteristic	Civil Status		
	Single	Married	Difference
Characteristics used more often to describe married people			
Happy	7.3	28.1	20.8
Loving	0.0	32.2	32.2
Secure, stable	0.0	10.5	10.5
Kind, caring, giving	2.3	48.7	46.4
Faithful, loyal	16.3	0.0	16.3
Compromising	0.0	15.9	15.9
Reliable, careful	1.5	7.6	6.1
Dependent, needy	1.0	6.5	5.5
Characteristics used more often to describe single people			
Lonely	16.8	0.2	−16.6
Shy	9.3	1.1	−8.2
Unhappy	8.0	2.9	−5.1
Insecure	7.3	0.0	−7.3
Inflexible, stubborn	6.8	1.6	−5.2
Flirtatious	8.8	0.0	−8.8
Looking for a partner	11.3	0.0	−11.3
Independent	36.2	1.6	−34.6
Sociable, friendly, fun	21.4	10.1	−11.3

Notes. Degrees of freedom were (1,948). Difference = married minus single. All differences were significant at $p < .001$ except the difference for insecure which was $p < .01$.

Across all of our manipulations of coupled status, targets described as coupled were rated as better adjusted (e.g., happier, more secure, more emotionally close to others) and more socially mature (less lonely, shy, fearful of rejection, and immature) than targets described as single. College student targets described as currently in a relationship were judged more favorably than targets described as not currently in a relationship, and college students who once were in a relationship were judged more favorably than students who were never in a relationship.

Single targets were also consistently viewed as more self-centered and envious than married targets, as were students described as not currently in a relationship, relative to those currently in a relationship. Independence and commitment to a career were more often ascribed to single targets than to married targets.

In a series of five experiments using a similar methodology, Conley and Collins (2002) also found that single targets were generally viewed as more likely to have had a sexually transmitted disease or to have HIV than married targets, even though the sexual behaviors described in the profiles were identical. The single targets were also seen as more promiscuous, and as having riskier personality traits. Overall evaluations of the single targets were more negative, too. These findings are especially interesting in light of actual patterns of sexual behavior: People in close sexual partnerships are the ones especially unlikely to practice safe sex (Misovich, Fisher, & Fisher, 1997).

Moderators of Harshness: Do Any Singles Get a Break From Any Perceivers?

Is it only the "smug marrieds" who derogate singles?   In most of the experimental research assessing stereotypes of singles, the participants were college students (Etaugh & Birdoes, 1991; Etaugh & Malstrom, 1981; Morris, DePaulo, et al., 2004). It appears, then, that singles believe the negative stereotypes about their own group. However, since most college students assume they will get married (DePaulo & Morris, 2001) perhaps they do not identify with the single targets described in the studies and they are actually derogating an out-group. That possibility is undermined by the results of experiments that have included noncollege participants (Conley & Collins, 2002; Morris, DePaulo, et al., 2004): Even among older participants, both single and coupled people derogated single targets. In our research, the married men and the single women judged singles especially harshly.

The pervasiveness of negative beliefs about singles is also suggested by the results of decades of survey research, in which national samples of American citizens have been asked whether they believe that married people are happier than single people. They do (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001).

Are younger singles perceived differently than older singles?   We also found evidence that adults grow into the stigma of being single. When the targets were described as 40 years old (compared to when they were described as 25), the singles were perceived as even more socially immature and maladjusted than the married targets. Still, even the 25-year-old singles were viewed more negatively than the 25-year-old married targets. Moreover, targets as young as college students were viewed negatively if they were not in a romantic relationship or had no romantic relationship experience.

Is it better (in perceivers' minds) to have married and divorced than never to have married at all?   In a pair of studies, Etaugh and her colleagues compared targets in four categories: always single, divorced, widowed, and married (Etaugh & Birdoes 1991; Etaugh & Malstrom, 1981). The married targets were generally rated more positively than all of the other targets. Consistent with our expectations, the divorced targets were perceived as more attractive and more sociable than the targets who had always been single; however, they were also seen as less stable than the singles (Etaugh & Malstrom, 1981). In one of the five studies reported by Conley and Collins (2002), coupled status was operationalized by comparing married targets to divorced targets. That was the one study in which the targets who were not married were rated no differently on sexual riskiness than the targets who were married.

What about especially well-liked or accomplished singles—are they derogated, too?   Perhaps perceivers take a dim view of targets who have always been single not because they have no romantic partner but because of the possibility that they have no close relationships at all. Conley and Collins (2002) wondered about that, so in one of their studies, the coupled targets were described as living with a romantic partner and the single targets were described as living with a close friend. The single targets were not saved from stigma by their close friendship. Just like the always-single targets in the other studies, they were rated more negatively than the coupled targets on every dimension. Morris (2002) addressed the same question by crossing relationship status (single or married) with friendship status (has close friendships or does not). If perceivers are judgmental about singles because they suspect that singles have no close relationships of any sort, then single targets should be protected from negative evaluations in the condition in which they were described as having close friends. But that is not what Morris found. Singles were judged more negatively than couples even when they did have close friends.

The findings seemed to be building to the conclusion that married people are simply viewed as better than singles. Because married people, by definition, have one particular relationship that single people do not have (a sexual partnership), and because that one relationship is so highly valued, there is little singles can do to bridge that perceptual gap.

To test that possibility a bit more stringently, we created profiles of single targets (and comparable ones of married targets) who were outstanding in some way (DePaulo & Morris, 2004). In four variations of the experiment, we described targets who had great career accomplishments, or impressive material success, or wonderful interpersonal ties, or who practiced remarkable altruism. (In the control conditions, the target's accomplishments were described as ordinary.) Here and there our results showed that various types of successes narrowed the gap in perceptions between single and married targets, but almost inevitably, the gap was still there and it favored the targets who were married.

Are negative perceptions of singles motivated? There was something else we wanted to begin to test in those studies of outstanding achievements: our growing suspicion that perceivers had a dog in this fight. We sensed a reluctance to concede that single adults really could be good, healthy, and happy people. To make that case convincingly would take a lot more work. Here we summarize just the first step, which is the only one we have taken so far. We asked our participants to rate the targets' genuine happiness, and also to rate how happy the targets would say they were. In all four versions of the study, we found the same thing. Married targets were always rated as happier than single targets, both in their genuine happiness and in their claimed happiness. Even more interestingly, the single targets' claims to happiness were perceived as more exaggerated than were the married targets' claims. Essentially, our participants seemed to be saying: Single people might say they are happy, but they are not really as happy as they claim.

Are Singles Rejected Interpersonally?

Commentaries on social life in America, self-help books for singles, and guides for therapists typically share the belief that singles are interpersonally rejected by friends who become coupled (e.g., Kipnis, 2003; Schwartzberg, Berliner, & Jacob, 1995). There are hints of evidence consistent with these beliefs. As two people progress toward engagement, the social network members they have in common increase; if the relationship begins to deteriorate, then they establish networks that are more separate (Milardo, 1982). Over time, as couples become more serious, they are more likely to spend time only with each other (Milardo,

Johnson, & Huston, 1983; Surra, 1985). Acquaintances and friends of moderate closeness seem to be rejected gradually (Milardo et al., 1983). Close friends may not be dropped from the network of a person who is becoming involved in a romantic relationship; however, the value attached to the opinions of close friends declines precipitously at marriage (Johnson & Leslie, 1982).

We surmise that as couples become more serious, the time they spend socializing is more likely to be spent with other couples and less likely to be spent with friends who are single. However, the studies we have cited do not specify the single or coupled status of the network members who are seen more often and those who are left behind. Also unclear from the research reports are the dynamics of the process of inclusion and exclusion. Informal accounts suggest it is the couples who become the power brokers, deciding whether their single friends are to be included, and if so, under what conditions. (e.g., Amador & Kiersky, 1998). However, so far as we know, there is no systematic research on this topic. Possible alternative scenarios, in which single people less often initiate social activities with friends who are becoming intensively coupled, remain unexplored.

The focus in the relevant research is typically on the couples, not the single people. The kinds of questions that are asked, then, are about the couples. How do their networks change as they become closer? To what extent do they spend time only with each other? Whose opinions matter to them and how does that change over time? The singles who are the focus of pertinent research are those who were once married. Thus, there are studies that suggest that widows and divorced people see less of the married people who once had a place of prominence in their social networks (e.g., Milardo, 1987; Morgan, Carder, & Neal, 1997). Again, however, the dynamics are unclear. For example, do widowed people simply walk away from the table of couples, or are they no longer invited to attend? Is the issue discussed or does one party simply presume to know the wishes of the other? If so, who is doing the presuming?

Are Singles Economically Disadvantaged and Discriminated Against?

Discrimination Against Singles Is Legal

Legally, a treasure trove of benefits is available only to citizens who are married, and that, we believe, is discriminatory. For example, the mission of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission is to assure equal protection under the law regardless of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, age, or disability. Civil status is not covered.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission protects workers from discrimination based on the same kinds of attributes as does the Civil Rights Commission, and again, civil status is not in the mix. At the state level, as of 2004, 23 states offered no protections whatsoever from discrimination on the basis of marital status, and some of the others offered only limited protections.

Real-World Evidence of Discrimination Against Singles

The fact that citizens are not federally protected from discrimination on the basis of their civil status does not mean that such discrimination will in fact occur. However, there is ample evidence that it does. For example, compared to single men, married men have higher salaries and are more likely to receive promotions across a broad range of professions, even when controlling for relevant factors such as performance or seniority (Antonovics & Town, 2004; Bellas, 1992; Budig & England, 2001; Keith, 1986; Toutkoushian, 1998). Further, when total compensation is considered, the differences become even more pervasive and more dramatic. That is because many companies offer subsidized benefits to the spouses of married workers; single workers are rarely offered an alternate form of compensation. The Social Security system is also discriminatory. Two workers might do the same job at the same salary for the same number of years, but if one is married and the other is single, their contributions are not treated equally when they die. The surviving spouse may be eligible for a portion of the married worker's benefits, while the same benefits earned by the single worker go back into the system.

While the oft maligned "marriage penalty" in taxation has drawn protest, little has been said about the marriage bonus and singles penalty that occur more frequently (Fox, 2004). Singles are also treated less favorably with regard to estate taxes and capital gains breaks on the sale of their homes. They are often offered less favorable terms on automobile insurance, and they experience housing discrimination, too. Single women find it more difficult than married women to qualify for approval for in vitro fertilization and for adoption (Millbank, 1997). Singles who pay full price for memberships in health clubs and automobile clubs, for restaurant meals, and for an array of other goods and services are subsidizing the couples and families who take advantage of special family discounts or two-for-one coupons.

Experimental Evidence of Discrimination Against Singles

Would evidence of discrimination against singles also show up in controlled experiments? In studies in which we asked undergraduates to take the role of a landlord and decide which of three potential tenants they would prefer (Morris, Sinclair, & DePaulo, 2004), they overwhelmingly chose the married couple (70%) when the other choices were a single woman (18%) and a single man (10%). They also embraced the married couple (80%) when they could have chosen a cohabiting couple (12%) or a pair of friends (8%).

Singlism Without Compunction or Even Awareness

So What If There Is Discrimination Against Singles—Is There Anything Wrong With That?

In our first two studies of rental discrimination, we deliberately created profiles of single applicants that were as similar as possible to the profiles of the married applicants. When willingness to discriminate proved robust to those controls, we wondered whether people even recognize unfair treatment as discriminatory and illegitimate when the targets are people who are single. To explore this question, we created a scenario in which the single tenant should have had an edge over the married tenant but was still turned down (Morris, Sinclair, & DePaulo, 2004).

Participants read about a landlord who had two 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.

We also included a number of comparison conditions in which, for example, a woman offered to pay more than a man, or an African American more than a White person.

When the landlord passed over an African American who was willing to pay more for the property than the White person who was selected, participants knew just what this meant and they spelled it out in their open-ended responses. This was prejudice. It was discrimination. It was unfair, illegitimate, and wrong. In fact, 71% of the respondents who read about the rejected African American said something of the sort. Substantial percentages did the same when the unchosen applicant was a woman or an obese person. However, when an applicant was rejected based on civil status, respondents believed the landlord made the right decision. In fact, participants justified the landlord's decision by using stereotypes of single and married people as if they were valid.

Perceptions of Singles Seem Unselfconsciously Harsh

In the study in which we asked participants to list their thoughts about people who are single (Morris, DePaulo, et al., 2004), we did find some positive descriptions. Yet we also found lists such as "ugly, mean, not social" and "stubborn, not very pleasing to look at, bad personal hygiene, very cruel." To us, it is inconceivable that contemporary college students would make such unabashedly harsh statements about people who are already recognized as unfairly stigmatized (such as African Americans).

Also remarkable were the paeans to married people that our participants penned. For example, "cuddle, talk, communicative, compatible, patient, honest, sincere, loving, warm, tender" and "friendly, selfless, devoted, trustworthy, and confident." More than 500 participants listed their thoughts about people who are married; almost every other one spontaneously described married people as kind, caring, or giving. About 400 people listed their thoughts about singles; only 2% of them mentioned those traits. Nearly one in every three participants describing married people used the term "loving"; not a single person describing singles mentioned that trait.

In our other studies, too, there were substantial differences in the perceptions of single and married targets. For example, the people from the community thought that the single targets differed from the married targets by more than a standard deviation in adjustment ($d = 1.07$) and social maturity ($d = 1.29$). The college students reported differences of more than two standard deviations ($d = 2.51$ and 2.28).

Is There Any Awareness of the Stigmatized Status of People Who Are Single?

Do single people realize they are stigmatized? Morris (2004) posed this question to 50 people from the community (half of whom were single): "In our culture, members of many social groups or categories are the targets of negative stereotypes or discrimination. Do you belong to any such groups?" Yes, claimed 73% of the African American participants, but only 4% of the singles.

Next, Morris (2004) gave participants a big hint. She listed more than 30 groups, including singles, and asked participants to indicate for each group whether they were a member of it. Then they indicated whether they thought the group was the target of negative stereotypes or discrimination. This time, 30% of singles recognized that singles are stigmatized, up from 4% in the previous study, but still far below the 90% of African Americans who recognized that their group is stigmatized. In fact, the same percentage of people (30%) thought they were stigmatized because they were pe-

destrians, and we had included pedestrians as a filler category.

Invisibility: It Is Not Just the Stigma That Goes Unacknowledged

It is not just single people who seem not to notice the stigma against singles. The thriving field of social stigma has not often recognized that stigma, either. Moreover, it is not just the stigma that goes unacknowledged. Singles themselves, as singles (rather than, say, as generic research participants), are largely missing from the discipline. For example, there is no entry for "single" in any volume of any edition of the *Handbook of Social Psychology*. Even the relationships most likely to be significant to people who are single, such as friendships and relationships with siblings, are often overlooked in the professional literature. Social scientists are far more likely to study romantic and marital relationships (Fingerman & Hay, 2002).

The neglect of singles is most remarkable when it is practiced against self-interests by notably self-interested groups, such as politicians. Campaign rhetoric is replete with odes to "family values," "working families," and healthy marriages and with pledges to leave no child behind. Until the recent discovery of singles as a potentially powerful demographic, singles were rarely the targets of political pandering (Pollitt, 2004). Even now, political appeals to singles often seem condescendingly crafted from the most belittling stereotypes (DePaulo, 2004).

Singlism in Science

How Social Scientists Perpetuate the Myth of Marital Bliss

So far, we have argued that in society at large, an uncontested Ideology of Marriage and Family has resulted in the stigmatizing of people who are single, and that this singlism is practiced mostly without compunction or even awareness. In this section, we suggest that the work of social scientists, including the best in the business, is also shaped by the ideology. As an example, we will show how award-winning professionals perpetuate the myth of marital bliss.

> Given our need to belong and the resulting link between friendship and happiness, does marriage predict greater happiness? Or is there more happiness in pleasure-seeking independence than under the 'yoke' of marriage? (David Myers, 1999, chapter in *Well-Being*)

> Happily married couples are healthier, happier, wealthier, and sexier than are singles, especially single men. (E. Mavis Hetherington and John Kelly, 2002, *For Better or For Worse*)

We suspect Myers and Hetherington and Kelly meant to address the same question: Do single and married people differ from each other in happiness? Neither state the issue quite so straightforwardly. Myers does not use the word "single" at all; "pleasure-seeking independence" is his synonym. Those pleasure seekers who see marriage as a "yoke" are on one side of the equation. On the other are marriage, the need to belong, and the link between friendship and happiness. With the issue so framed, it wasn't much of a contest as to who would win.

It is hard to argue with Hetherington and Kelly's statement about the link between marriage and happiness. Cutting to the core of the issue as it pertains to happiness, Hetherington and Kelly said this: "Happily married couples are happier than are singles, especially single men." When one side included only those married people who are happy, and the other included all single people (with single men weighted especially heavily), we again found that ideological expectations had been upheld.

We fear that if the scientists are working within the ideology in their framing of the issues and their summaries of the literature, they are more likely to perpetuate the ideology than to subject it to a fair test. To illustrate, we will start with a statement about marriage and happiness that appeared in the media and trace back to the evidence on which it was based. The statement appeared in a 2003 *Time* magazine story (Corliss, 2003), "Is there a formula for joy?" Martin Seligman's book, *Authentic Happiness* (2002), had recently been published, and the award-winning author was quoted at length. Finally, it came time to unveil the factors that mattered most. "Married people are happier than any other configuration of people," Seligman said.

Apparently, Seligman was not misquoted. In *Authentic Happiness*, he described the greater happiness of married than of unmarried people as a "proven fact" (2002, p. 56). He also claimed that marriage "works remarkably well from a Positive Psychology point of view" (p. 186). In addition, he listed getting married as one of the five external circumstances of your life that you can change to become happier—"a robust effect" (p. 61).

There are hints here and there in *Authentic Happiness* that the picture is not really so clear. For example, Seligman concedes that "among those in 'not very happy' marriages, their level of happiness is lower than the unmarried or the divorced" (2002, p. 55), reminiscent of Hetherington and Kelly's claim that married people are happier than singles, as long as you include among the married only those who are happily married. Seligman also mentions relationships other than romantic ones. For instance, on the list of external circumstances that people can change to become happier is to "acquire a rich social network" (p. 61). Perhaps most importantly, Seligman did acknowledge that the

purported role of marriage in producing happiness may not be causal. Still, none of those qualifications deterred him from posing the question, "Why does marriage work so well?" (p. 187).

As evidence for the greater happiness of married than unmarried people, Seligman initially cited a meta-analysis of subjective well-being (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999). That review included a nuanced discussion of the complexities of the relationship between civil status and well-being. The authors noted that factors such as age, income, gender, culture, and changes over time in societal expectations all needed to be considered. They underscored the variability in the quality of marital relationships, and discussed cohabitation separately from marriage. One summary statistic was offered, from an earlier meta-analysis of studies published prior to 1980 (Haring-Hidore, Stock, Okun, & Witter, 1985): The mean correlation between marriage and subjective well-being was .14. In the original report of that meta-analysis, there were some interesting moderators of the overall effect. For example, the correlation between marriage and subjective well-being was smaller when married people were compared only to people who have always been single ($r = .09$), and it was smaller for women ($r = .12$) than for men ($r = .17$). In sum, the Diener et al. (1999) review, and the original reports on which its conclusions were based, did not seem to provide a strong foundation for Seligman's bold claims about proven facts and robust effects.

In a later more detailed discussion of the "proven fact" that marriage "works remarkably well" (p. 186), Seligman (2002) pointed to a study in which "*every* person (save one) in the top 10% of happiness was currently involved in a romantic relationship" (p. 187). We consulted that study (Diener & Seligman, 2002), and discovered that the top 10% included all of 22 people. Moreover, all of the participants were undergraduates, suggesting the possibility that few, if any, of them were married. The study is relevant, though, for as Seligman explains, "Marriage, stable pair-bonding, romantic love—for the sake of economy, I call all of these 'marriage' throughout this chapter" (p. 186).

We found something else in the original report of those happiest 22 people: data on the relationships of the unhappiest people and the people who reported moderate happiness. The data were not entirely comparable to what was reported in the *Authentic Happiness* book. For example, there was no report of the number of the unhappiest people who were involved in a romantic relationship. However, there were self-reports of romantic relationships for all three groups (on a scale ranging from below average to above average). The happiest group did indeed report better romantic relationships than the unhappiest group, though it is not clear whether the unhappiest

group had fewer romantic relationships or miserable ones. We also noticed that the happiest group differed from the unhappiest group on the other relationship measures as well. They reported better relationships with their close friends and family members, and their peers also described them as having better relationships. Overall, the report strengthened our belief in the importance of relationships but did not seem to provide any empirical support for the special importance of romantic relationships.

Seligman (2002), though, had not finished making his case for marriage in *Authentic Happiness*. He went on to claim

> Perhaps the single most robust fact about marriage across many surveys is that married people are happier than anyone else. Of married adults, 40 percent call themselves "very happy," while only 23 percent of never-married adults do. This is true of every ethnic group studied, and it is true across the seventeen nations that psychologists have surveyed. (p. 187)

The reference for that statement was David Myers' book, *The Pursuit of Happiness* (1993). "The chapter on marriage in this book is the most authoritative source I know (p. 298)," Seligman said.

So, we read the section on marriage and well-being in *The Pursuit of Happiness*. Here is what Myers (1993) had to say about the survey data:

> Survey after survey of many tens of thousands of Europeans and Americans have produced this consistent result: Compared to those single or widowed, and especially compared to those divorced or separated, married people report being happier and more satisfied with life. In the United States, for example, fewer than 25 percent of unmarried adults but nearly 40 percent of married adults report being "very happy." (p. 156)

For those figures, Myers cited Inglehart (1990). We looked at that next.

In a table in the Appendix to the Inglehart (1990) book is a summary of the percentages of people from 16 countries who described themselves as "very happy," broken down by civil status. The response options were "very happy," "fairly happy," and "not too happy"; only the results for the "very happy" people are reported in the table. We looked first at the mean across the 16 countries: 25% of married people, and 21% of always-single people, described themselves as very happy, a far cry from the figures of 40% and 23% cited by Seligman. Perhaps Seligman, like Myers, was actually referring specifically to the United States, rather than to all of the nations that psychologists have surveyed. The actual numbers for the United States (based on 2325 people in 1981–1982) are 37% and 26%, which, we suppose, are close enough. Interestingly, though, the 37% of married people who call themselves very happy do not include couples who were

living as married. By Seligman's heuristic of including stable pair-bonds and romantic relationships in the same category as marriage, cohabiters should have been included. Their 30% rate of happiness would have brought the percentage of married who were very happy even closer to the percentage for the people who had always been single.

The more striking discrepancy, though, was between Seligman's bold statement of the consistency of the happiness difference (between married and always single) across all of the surveyed nations, and what we found in the original report. In Portugal, 1% more always-single than married people described themselves as very happy; in France, there was no difference; and in Belgium, Spain, Italy, and Denmark, the difference favoring married people was just one or two percentage points. In fact, the difference between the married and the ever-single adults in the United States, even before it was overstated by Seligman, was already the biggest difference reported for any nation.

Myers (2000) also referred readers to two other reports. One, by Gove and his colleagues (Gove, Style, & Hughes, 1990) reported no happiness data, but a paper a year earlier from the same lab did (Gove & Shin, 1989). A nationally stratified probability sample of 2248 adults from the United States in 1974–1975 reported their happiness on a 1 through 4 scale, with 4 indicating greatest happiness. The means were 3.3 for married, 3.2 for always-single, and 2.9 for both the widowed and the divorced. The other paper cited by Myers was an examination of trends over time in survey data collected in the United States from 1972 through 1986 (Glenn and Weaver, 1988). The analyses of the percentage of people claiming they were "very happy" led the authors to conclude that the relationship between marriage and happiness was steadily decreasing over time. The smallest difference between married people and people who had always been single occurred in the next-to-most recent year of the time span studied; in 1985, that difference was just 0.6 percentage points.

It is not surprising that conclusions would become less nuanced as authors move from their original empirical reports to summaries in trade books and then to statements made to the press. What is noteworthy in the example we reviewed is the ideological consistency in the ways in which the data were simplified. A meta-analysis reporting a complex relationship between civil status and well-being becomes a ringing endorsement of marriage. In the same paragraph of a trade book, happy college students in romantic relationships were counted as married, but adults living as married in large national survey samples—whose inclusion would have dulled the gloss on marriage—were not. These examples and the others we described may well be dwarfed in significance by an even greater potential bias—the selective citing of studies compatible with the myth of marital bliss.

What Is the Actual Link Between Civil Status and Happiness?

The short answer to this question is that we do not know. In a causal sense, we can never know since no one is about to randomly assign people to different civil statuses. The best statistical estimate of the link between civil status and happiness would come from a comprehensive and up-to-date meta-analysis. The review we cited previously, which reported a combined correlation of .14 between subjective well being and being currently married (Haring-Hidore et al., 1985), is already about three decades old. Without a current compilation of all relevant studies, we cannot say for sure whether Seligman's conclusions, or anyone else's, are based on an unrepresentative sampling of the literature. What we will do instead is (a) describe a particularly compelling recent study, (b) suggest potential moderators of the link between civil status and outcome variables, and (c) point to studies, not often cited, that suggest conclusions at odds with the prevailing ideology. We collect the latter set of studies not to suggest that they are representative of the entire literature, as they surely are not. But they do intimate some likely empirical boundaries to the mythical marital bliss.

A 15-Year Longitudinal Study of Civil Status and Happiness

The most comprehensive and compelling individual study appeared in print after both the Seligman and the Hetherington and Kelly books were published. In a 15-year longitudinal study with 15 waves of data collection, Lucas and his colleagues tracked the reported happiness of thousands of participants, focusing particularly on those who married and stayed married throughout the study (Lucas, Clark, Georgellis, & Diener, 2003). This design allowed for a within-participants analysis of changes in happiness over time for the same individuals as they made a transition from being single to married. The usual between-participants comparisons at each point in time were made as well. The latter comparisons suggested a link even smaller than the one reported by Haring-Hidore et al. (1985). Civil status accounted for about 1% of the between-participants variance in happiness in any given year.

In their within-participants analyses, Lucas et al. (2003) divided the data for each participant into three time periods. The year leading up to the marriage, together with the year following the marriage, was defined as the time of the marriage. The other two time periods were the years before and after the marriage.

Examination of the initial happiness reports provided a hint of a selection effect. The participants who got married during the study and stayed that way started out reporting happiness levels .278 of a scale point higher (on an 11-point scale) than the average

participant in the study. However, in supplementary analyses, the authors found that the participants who married and then divorced were no different than average in their initial happiness.

For the participants who got married and stayed married, there was an increase in happiness (of .234 of a scale point) at the time of the marriage. The increase was smaller for the participants who had been especially happy as singles. (The authors ruled out statistical regression as an artifactual explanation.) Typically, though, the initial blip in happiness did not last: "People were significantly less satisfied in the years after marriage than they were in the years surrounding marriage" (p. 532). When participants' happiness after marriage was compared to their happiness before marriage, again the results were a wash: "On average, they are no happier in the years after marriage than they were in the years before marriage" (p. 532).

Lucas and his colleagues emphasized that there was much individual variability in patterns of happiness. For example, they noted:

> there were as many people who ended up less happy than they started as there were people who ended up happier than they started (a fact that is particularly striking given that we restricted the sample to people who stayed married). (p. 536)

Clearly, the weight of the evidence from this impressive study does not support any sweeping statements about the transformative power of marriage in improving well-being. Still, it is just one study, and so we await a timely and exhaustive meta-analysis of the literature.

Potential Moderators of the Link Between Civil Status and Well-Being

In the meantime, our nonquantitative reading of the literature leads us to believe that Diener and his colleagues (Diener et al., 1999) were correct in suggesting the link between civil status and happiness is likely to be importantly moderated by demographic, temporal, and cultural factors. Here we will discuss a few of those factors that seem especially significant. In so doing, we draw from literatures on other important outcome variables, such as health and longevity, as well as happiness.

Gender. In 1972, sociologist Jesse Bernard underscored the distinction between his marriage and hers. In short, his was better. Bernard claimed that compared to single men, married men had better mental health, greater earning power, lower rates of suicide, and greater happiness. In contrast, married women suffered in mental and physical health in comparison not only to married men but also to single

women. Bernard's claims sparked a furor, and scientists have since churned out reams of data to test the validity of the quip about "his and her marriages."

Bernard's thesis is essentially a 2 × 2 interaction (Single or Married × Male or Female) in which the simple effects are also of interest. Within civil status categories, are married men better off than married women, and are single women better off than single men? Across civil statuses, are married men better off than single men, and are single women better off than married women?

The part of Bernard's thesis that is least often questioned is the claim that married men fare better than single men. Although not all studies support this conclusion (e.g., White, 1992), the ones that do not appear to be in the minority. The value of marriage to women, though, seems much less clear.

Some indicators of satisfaction with marriage include the inclination to dissolve the union as well as the disinclination to form a new one. On both of these indices, women seem less satisfied than men. Women are more likely than men to initiate the break up of a marriage (and of dating relationships) and they are less likely to remarry following divorce or widowhood (Helgeson, 2002).

Women seem more attuned to the quality of a marriage than are men, and that attunement may be linked to another difference between the sexes. Whereas for men what is often important is whether or not they are married, for women another consideration is critical: What is the quality of the marriage?

Relationship quality. In a study of long-term marriages, wives experienced more problems with physical and mental health than husbands when their marriages were unhappy (Levenson, Carstensen, & Gottman, 1993). Wives also seem more reactive to their husbands' problems than their husbands are to theirs (Whiffen & Gotlib,1989). Results of a longitudinal study showed that depression in one spouse was followed by depression in the other spouse (Tower & Kasl, 1996). Although both spouses seemed to catch each other's depression, women responded a bit sooner to their husbands' depression than their husbands did to theirs. Interestingly, the contagion effects were especially strong in the "good" marriages (i.e., the ones in which the spouses were especially close to each other). As to whether an unhappy marriage is better than no marriage, findings from a study of more than 5,000 married and divorced people suggest that the answer is no (Renne, 1971). The biggest differences in health were not between the divorced people and the married, but the happily married and the unhappily married. Divorced people—especially divorced women—were in better health than the unhappily married.

Such studies suggest that marital quality may act as an intensifier of health and well-being especially for women. Perhaps, then, people currently in a marriage are more likely than people not in a marriage to be found among the very happiest people as well as the most miserable. If so, then studies such as those we described earlier, which report results only for people who choose the happiest response option available, may be telling only half the story.

In a meta-analytic review of sex differences in the link between civil status and happiness, Wood, Rhodes, and Whelan (1989) included only studies of positive well-being and concluded that "for both sexes the married state (vs. unmarried) was associated with favorable well-being, but the favorable outcomes proved stronger for women than men" (p. 249). They did not include measures of negative outcomes in their quantitative analysis but they did provide this nonquantitative summary: "Research focusing on negative well-being has found that married women experience higher rates of psychological disturbance than married men" (p. 252). For women, then, marriage does seem to be linked either to very good or very bad outcomes.

There is a distinction that Wood and her colleagues did not make that we see as an especially important one. They did not differentiate among subcategories of singles, but instead treated the divorced, the widowed, and the people who had always been single as one group. They also did not differentiate among subcategories of married people (e.g., married for the first, second, or third time).

Divorced, widowed, or always single? Married or remarried? Sprinkled throughout the results we've reviewed so far have been hints that not all subcategories of singles have equivalent outcomes. The 1985 meta-analysis, for example, showed a smaller link between civil status and subjective well-being when married people were compared only to people who had always been single than when they were compared to all categories of singles (Haring-Hidore et al., 1985). In the Gove and Shin (1989) study, the small advantage in happiness of the married people over the unmarried was even tinier when the married people were compared to those who had always been single. Other studies and reviews also underscore the importance of distinguishing among subcategories of singles (e.g., Verbrugge, 1979), with some emphasizing the favorable outcomes of people—especially women—who have always been single (e.g., Dykstra, 1995;Gove, Style, & Hughes, 1990) and others noting the particularly poor outcomes of those separated or divorced (e.g., Bloom, White, & Asher, 1978). For example, in a study of more than 11,000 Canadians, people who had always been single were in better health than people who were married, divorced, separated, or widowed, and women who had always been single were the healthiest of all (White, 1992).

In a study of longevity, Tucker and her colleagues asked whether a person's current civil status is the best predictor of a long life (Tucker, Friedman, Wingard, & Schwartz, 1996). The authors analyzed the data from more than 1000 participants in the Terman Life-Cycle study, initiated in 1921. They found that whether a person was married at midlife (in 1950) was not the best predictor of longevity, which it should be if marriage is "protective" of well-being. Instead, it was consistency that mattered most. People who had always been married and people who had always been single lived the longest. People who were currently married at midlife, but had previously been divorced, had a greater mortality risk.

Social class, income, and wealth.   Civil status is associated with a number of other factors, each of which offers an alternative explanation for any link between civil status and an outcome variable (Pearlin & Johnson, 1977). Among these are economic factors, such as social class, income, and wealth. Singles miss out on the many bargains and promotions offered only to couples. Life singles cannot be the beneficiaries of another person's Social Security benefits, nor the automatic and untaxed recipients of the accumulation of wealth passed on in a will. Singles who live alone do not have the advantages of the economies of scale. All of these kinds of factors can add up to sparser financial resources for people who are single than for people who are coupled or married. In turn, such economic disadvantage could translate, for example, into less access to quality health care, which in turn can result in poorer health.

Race and ethnicity.   Some of the most important demographic changes we described earlier characterize Americans of all races and ethnic groups. For example, the lower rates of marrying and remarrying, the high rates of divorce, and the increases in cohabitation are not specific to particular subgroups (Cherlin, 1998). Still, the changes have been more dramatic for some groups than for others. For example, whereas African Americans once married at a younger age than European Americans, they now marry later or not at all. Once married, they report less happiness in the marriage. They are also more likely to divorce, less likely to feel stigmatized by divorce (Kitson, Babri, Roach, & Placidi, 1989), and less likely to remarry (Cherlin, 1998). Race, then, is still another factor that can be added to the list of considerations that qualify the relationship between civil status and well-being.

Attitudes toward civil status.   One of the first scholars to try to encourage the scientific study of singles was Peter Stein (1976, 1981). He believed that singles could be usefully characterized by their perceptions of their single status as either voluntary or

involuntary and either temporary or stable. We do not typically think of people as marrying involuntarily (except in the old-fashioned sense of "having" to get married before the birth of a baby), yet a dominant ideology may result in just that outcome. That is, the decision to marry (though not the choice of partner) may often be made mindlessly; it is just assumed that marriage will be a step along one's life path. Perceptions of civil status as voluntary or involuntary, temporary or stable, may predict health and well-being for the married as well as the single.

Age.   One implication of the age-graded cultural norms for marrying (which we discussed earlier) is that people who are single may experience different degrees of social pressure or stigma at different ages. The research we reviewed earlier showed that singles are perceived especially more negatively than married people when the targets are 40 years old than when they are 25 years old (Morris, DePaulo, et al., 2004) and that women who are late in marrying are especially likely to be judged harshly (Krueger et al., 1995). Does the dimmer view of relatively older singles translate into greater distress experienced by those singles? In a study of the social clock, Rook and her colleagues found that people who were late in reaching various developmental milestones did report more distress than those who were early or on time. However, they experienced no more interpersonal conflict with their co-workers and reported even more social resources (Rook, Catalano, & Dooley,1989).

A study that addressed the issue even more directly is White's (1992) analysis of life satisfaction data from more than 11,000 Canadians. White tabled the differences among people of different civil statuses, separately by sex, for four year intervals beginning at age 15 and continuing to age 80 and beyond. When married women were compared to women who had always been single, they reported significantly greater life satisfaction only in the intervals from ages 25 through 34. There were no differences before or after those ages. (Among men, the married reported significantly greater life satisfaction than the always-single from ages 25 to 29, 35 to 39, and 60 to 69.)

Timing of the measurements.   There are important implications of the Lucas et al. (2003) finding that the small increase in happiness around the time of a marriage is short-lived. Studies comparing newlyweds to singles may be more likely to find differences favoring married people than studies in which the couples have been married for more than a year. Lucas and his colleagues also traced the well-being of people who had been widowed over the course of their 15-year study. On average, the widowed people also reported feelings of well-being that returned to just about where they were before the death of their spouse, though it

took about 8 years for that adaptation to occur. Other work has demonstrated that the affective implications of divorce are also more powerful around the time of the divorce than they are years later (Amato, 2000). And, singles' experiences change over the course of their lives, too (e.g., White, 1992).

Cohort, culture, and context. The implications of civil status may depend in important ways on the larger cultural and historical context and the particular cohort under study. Here we can offer more questions than answers. Would civil status have different implications for the poor if classism were less rampant (Lott, 2002) or for gays, lesbians, and transgendered people if heterosexism waned? Were single people healthier than married people in White's (1992) study, though not in other studies of Americans, because Canada has universal health care and the United States does not? Do people feel differently about their civil status when the beloved television stars of the time are single working women who stay single, such as *Mary Tyler Moore*, compared to when so many of the single stars, even on shows such as *Sex and the City*, end up coupled? What were the implications of civil status before the women's movement of the 20th century (e.g., when Jesse Bernard was conducting the research for her book) compared to the years during and following that time of rapid social change? Would the implications be different for women who were children at the time of the movement compared to those who were adolescents or adults (e.g., Elder, 1974; Stewart & Healy, 1989; Twenge, 2002)?

So Why Aren't Singles Miserable?

If the Ideology of Marriage and Family is as powerful as we have claimed, then people who are single should be miserable. They should feel sad and lonely because just about everyone believes that they are (the ideology is largely uncontested), because they are targets of stereotyping and discrimination, and because social life is organized around couples and families. By definition, singles do not have the relationship that, ideologically, is the one truly important peer relationship—the relationship that confers wholeness, completeness, happiness, and meaningfulness. How, then, can it be that singles do not seem to differ all that much in well-being from people who are married? And, why is it that the singles who are most likely to do well are those who have never in their lives experienced marriage? And further, why is it that when there are sex differences among singles, it is women—the targets of the most insistent ideological pressure to find mates and keep them—who are likely to do especially well?

Close Relationships That Last a Lifetime–And Also a Word About Marital Relationships

Ideologically, adults have a unique need for one particular kind of relationship—a sexual partnership. Theoretically and empirically, however, the need for other people is not so narrow as the ideology suggests. We think that need is better captured by Baumeister and Leary's (1995) belongingness hypothesis: "Human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships" (p. 497). We believe that single people do not differ much from married people in well-being in large part because they typically *do* have lasting, positive, and significant relationships.

Singles and their siblings. No relationship is likely to last longer than a relationship with a sibling. When a sexual partnership is just beginning, a sibling tie may already be decades old. When the sexual partnership ends, as so many do, the sibling relationship endures. At every decade of their adult lives, Americans are far more likely to have no spouse than to have no siblings (see Table 4).

Although much has been made of sibling rivalry, hostile relationships between siblings are atypical (Gold, 1989). By old age, sibling relationships often become closer (Cicirelli, 1995), and any sibling rivalries that did exist are likely to have softened (Allan, 1977). The adults especially likely to have close ties with siblings (as well as with nieces and nephews) and especially likely to have maintained those ties throughout their lives, are people who have always been single (Connidis, 2001). In contrast, many older married people believe that their sibling relationships were weakened as a result of their marriages (Ross & Milgram, 1982).

Singles and their friends. Like siblings, friends are important to people who are single throughout their adult lives. In their old age, people who have always been single continue to form more friendships, and

Table 4. *U.S. Data From 1996 for Siblings and 1995 for Spouse*

Age	% With No Siblings	% With No Spouse	
		Men	Women
25–34	5	47	38
35–44	4	28	30
45–54	5	23	28
55–64	6	19	33
65–74	8	20	46
75–84	6	26	68
85+	—	49	89

Notes. Adapted from Connidis, I., *Family Ties and Aging,* pages 21 and 31, Copyright 2001. Reprinted with permission of Sage Publications Inc.

maintain greater contact with their friends, than people who are, or once were, married (Connidis, 2001). Interviews with older women who have always been single suggest that these life singles typically have a whole convoy of people—often nearly a dozen—who have been important to each other for decades (Adams, 1976).

It is not that single people have larger social networks than married people; they do not (Wellman, Frank, Espinoza, Lundquist, & Wilson, 1991). What they may have, though, is intentional communities. The relationships they count as important are the ones they choose to maintain. Married people may be more likely to have friends-in-law that come with the spousal package or with the custom of socializing in couples.

Of course, partnered people vary in the friendships they maintain, and we think that can matter mightily. One hint comes from Wilcox's (1981) study comparing divorced women who were adjusting relatively well to those who were adjusting relatively poorly (using measures such as mood and physical symptoms). He found that the groups differed in the nature of their social networks before and after the divorce. The networks of the poorly adjusted changed dramatically, largely because many of their friends during marriage were friends and coworkers of their husband. In contrast, the networks of the well-adjusted divorced women were very stable over time.

But what about adult children?   It is increasingly commonplace for single people to have children. However, much of the literature on well-being in old age is based on people who grew up at a time when lifelong single people rarely had children. Doesn't that make it even more puzzling that the older single women from that literature were so unlikely to be miserable?

It would be puzzling if single people without children really did grow old alone. But even singles who live alone are no more likely to be isolated from nonkin than people who live with others (Fischer & Phillips, 1982). Also, as we have already shown, people who are single—especially women who have always been single—are especially likely to tend to their relationships with the people who matter to them.

Moreover, among the elderly, time spent with friends is a better predictor of well-being than time spent with adult children. This was one of the conclusions of a meta-analysis of 286 studies of well-being among the elderly (Pinquart & Sorensen, 2000). With regard to contact with adult children, what seemed to matter was the quality of that contact. Koropeckyj-Cox (2002) came to a similar conclusion in her study based on national survey data. The elderly who had adult children either fared especially well (if their relationships with their children were positive) or especially

poorly (if their relationships with their children were negative).

Other paths to fulfillment.   Because singles are defined in terms of a particular relationship they do not have, questions about the role of relationships in the lives of singles come easily to mind. Also important, however, are other life pursuits and other fundamental human needs (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Solky, 1996). Are singles more likely to meet their needs for autonomy than people who are coupled? So far as we know, there is no empirical answer to this question. Are sexual partners more or less likely to support the exercise of autonomy and competence than other kinds of social network members such as friends or relatives? What about opportunities to develop interests, to pursue passions, and to dedicate time to work? How might the option of solitude enable such opportunities, and do single or coupled people have more access to solitude?

Why Does Singlism Persist?

We have suggested that most of the differences between people who are single (especially those who have always been single) and people who are married are likely to be small, qualified in many ways, and unlikely consistently to favor members of one category over the other. If further research and meta-analytic work supports this conclusion, that would only add to a growing puzzle: Why does singlism persist?

It is not just the unreliability of any real differences between always-single and married people that should prove to be a challenge to singlism. So, too, should be the ever-growing number of people who are single, and the growing number of years of our adult lives that we spend single. Other social attitudes that at one point were intensely negative have softened over time (e.g., divorce became less stigmatized as it became more commonplace).

The persistence of singlism, and the largely uncontested dominance of the Ideology of Marriage and Family, also seem odd in a time of such highly developed sensitivities to issues of diversity. We have made a federal case out of so many dimensions of identity—race, sex, religion, sexual orientation, age, and disability. How is it that civil status has slipped under the cultural radar?

We will consider several kinds of answers. First, drawing from evolutionary psychology and from attachment theory, we will discuss the possibility that a sexual partnership is so fundamentally important, and so uniquely important, that people who have such a partnership should be favored over those who do not. Second, we will consider a social control perspective from sociology, in which the importance of marriage and family lies not in the interpersonal relationships

but in the social structures that link individuals to society. Next, we will ask whether the sexual partnership (or the institution of marriage), however important it may be, has an overly glorified place in contemporary American culture. In doing so, we return to a discussion of the culture of intensive coupling, this time noting how the defining ideas and practices have become ever more influential over time. Finally, we relate the Ideology of Marriage and Family to ideologies more generally and the functions they serve.

Are Sexual Partnerships Fundamentally or Uniquely Important?

The Evolutionary Argument

From an evolutionary perspective, it might be argued that a bias in favor of couples and two-parent families, and the complementary prejudice against singles, make sense. Buss and Kenrick (1998) described such a position. There are, they noted

> apparent adaptive functions in the bond between lovers. Beyond promoting physical and psychological well-being in the partners and increasing the regularity of sexual contact, such a bond promotes the survival of any offspring from the relationship. Bonded partners can engage in mutual protection and resource sharing, thus increasing their mutual probability of survival and capacity for parental investment. (p. 1002)

Until the very recent advent of reproductive technology, male–female sexual relations were, of course, the only means of human reproduction. But it is not the possibility of having sex or having children that separates singles from couples; many singles do both. Rather, the issue is whether a serious sexual partnership, marked by stability and continuity, is fundamentally and uniquely important to the couple or to their children.

Earlier, we addressed the issue of the importance of a sexual partnership to adults' well-being. What is left for us to address here is whether a sexual partnership is of fundamental or unique importance to the well-being of children.

Biological relatedness and offspring well-being.

Perhaps any special importance of sexual partnerships to the well-being of children is mainly a matter of biology. Maybe the bonds between adults are more enduring when they have borne biological children than when they have no children. And maybe adult investment in children is greater (and children, in turn, fare better) when two adults are biologically related to the children than when only one is (as in stepfamilies) or when neither parent is (as in adoptive families).

Rates of divorce are lower among couples who have minor children than among those who do not (Fisher, 1992). Yet even among those couples who do have dependent children, divorce rates are still substantial. Further, as the currency of the term "deadbeat dad" suggests, biological ties alone are too often insufficient to assure the continued investment of a father's resources in his own children.

What is the empirical answer to how children fare in different family types? A panel study conducted with a nationally representative sample of 799 families addressed this question (Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, & Stewart, 2001). The families included single-parent families, two-parent biological families, adoptive families, and stepfamilies. The authors found little difference across the various family types. For example, the children from the single-parent homes experienced the same level of well-being and the same success in their interpersonal relationships as did the children from the other family types. The authors concluded, "it is not enough to know that an individual lives in a particular family structure without knowing what takes place in that structure" (p. 850).

Other reviews also underscore the importance of the family environment. In one, the authors identified factors that put children at risk for poor outcomes (Repetti, Taylor, & Seeman, 2002). Risky families, the authors noted, "are characterized by conflict, anger, and aggression, by relationships that lack warmth and support, and by neglect of the needs of the offspring" (p. 356). Another review focused specifically on marital conflict and concluded that conflict in the marital dyad spills over into difficulties in the parent–child dyad (Erel & Burman, 1995). If parents are locked in conflict, are they better off staying together for the sake of the children? This is, of course, a much-debated question. The broadest-based empirical answer we found came from a 39-nation study comparing children whose parents were in very conflictual marriages and either did or did not divorce. The children reported greater well-being as adults if their parents divorced than if they stayed together (Gohm, Oishi, Darlington, & Diener, 1998).

A simple matter of numbers?

To those who believe in the special importance of two-parent families for the well-being of children, the benefits may be as much a function of simple numbers as of biology. Two parents, in this argument, can provide more resources than one, and are therefore more likely to meet the children's needs.

However, the reviews we just described suggest that two-parent families do not guarantee a warmer and more supportive environment for children than other family types. In fact, they do not even guarantee greater

economic resources. This is one of the fallacies underlying the government program to promote marriage among the poor: Eligible marriage partners may well be unemployed themselves.

There is another important assumption lurking behind the arguments and evidence we have reviewed so far: Children of single parents really do have only one caring and contributing adult in their lives, and the single parent perhaps has none. If this were typically the case, then similar outcomes for single-parent and two-parent families would be truly remarkable. In fact, however, many single parents have networks of people who care about them and their children (Hertz & Ferguson, 1997). Further, not all two-parent families have two emotionally present adults.

The numbers argument, though, does raise an interesting question. If, theoretically, two parents are better than one, then why aren't three better than two, and why wouldn't children be better off raised by a village than just a few adults? There is a potential strength in the networks of single parents, and in the village concept, that is not often recognized. That strength, we think, is in the looseness of the ties, relative to the tight interdependence of pairs practicing intensive coupling and intensive parenting. The problem with nonindependent units, as we all know from our statistical training, is that the total is in some ways less than the sum of its parts. We have already seen that spouses (wives especially) catch each other's depression and that the contagion is greater in the couples who are closer to each other. In times of trouble, children and their parents may be better off if there is someone to turn to outside of the nuclear family. Results from the 39-nation study (Gohm et al., 1998) provided suggestive evidence in support of that possibility. The authors categorized the countries as either collectivist or individualist and looked again at the key group of children whose parents had highly conflictual marriages and then divorced. As adults, the children reported greater well-being if they were from collectivist countries.

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1958, 1988), one of the most influential perspectives in modern psychology, has roots in evolutionary psychology. As explained by Hazan and Shaver (1994):

> A basic assumption of attachment theory is that, because of their extreme immaturity at birth, human infants can survive only if an adult is willing to provide protection and care. As a result of selection pressures, infants evolve behaviors that function to maintain proximity to a protector/caregiver. (pp. 2–3)

Infants and children will be especially likely to seek contact with an attachment figure when they are distressed. When they are not upset, the presence of the attachment figure serves as a "secure base" from which the children can venture to explore and play.

Most early research focused on infants' attachment to their mother. Bowlby (1979) maintained from the outset, however, that bonds of attachments were important over the entire life-span. In the last decade or so, the study of adult attachments has gained tremendous momentum. The premise has been that adults might also enjoy feelings of emotional security and protection if they have a secure attachment to another adult. They might also have more positive experiences at the form of adult exploration known as work (Hazan & Shaver, 1990). If attachment bonds are of such potential significance to adults, then it is important to know what sorts of adult bonds would qualify.

In her 1991 theoretical statement about attachment bonds across the life span, Mary Ainsworth described an attachment bond as one kind of affectional bond. She defined an affectional bond as "a relatively long-enduring tie in which the partner is important as a unique individual, interchangeable with none other … there is a need to maintain proximity, distress upon inexplicable separation, pleasure or joy upon reunion, and grief at loss" (p. 38). Attachment bonds are special in that they meet one other criterion: the attachment figure is a source of security and comfort.

Ainsworth (1991) believed that sexual partnerships, whether same-sex or heterosexual, could become attachment bonds. However, she did not construe the sexual component as a necessary feature of an adult attachment bond. She believed that other close and enduring relationships, such as close friendships and relationships with siblings, could also become attachment bonds.

Within a few years, a set of questions had been developed to identify the people to whom adults turned for emotional security. In 1997, Fraley and Davis reported that both romantic partners and best friends sometimes fit that role. By 1999, however, Hazan and Zeifman, despite citing the Fraley and Davis study, concluded that only sexual pair bonds could qualify as adult attachments. They made the argument that "pair bonds and infant-caregiver relationships show conspicuous similarities in the nature of physical contact, and these differentiate them from other classes of social relationships" (p. 341). The construal of parent–child touching as fundamentally similar to the touching between sexual partners could, we think, be reasonably regarded as startling.

There was more: "The social provisions of pair bonds are sufficiently distinctive that other social relationships—even close friendships or kin ties—cannot compensate for their loss" (p. 344). Perhaps. But they do not consider the complementary question: Are other relationships, such as close friendships or kin ties, sufficiently distinctive that a romantic pair

bond cannot compensate for their loss? Ideologically, that question is out of bounds. It seems to us that the fundamental theoretical issue is the delineation of the qualities that set adult attachment relationships apart from other adult relationships. Not all marital relationships will qualify and some friendships and relationships with relatives will. Once a relationship does become an attachment relationship—regardless of whether it is a sexual partnership—it may well be irreplaceable.

One more observation from Hazan and Zeifman (1999) about sexual pair bonds is also worth noting:

> As for the protective aspects of this kind of companionship, adults too need someone to look out for them and keep track of them—someone to initiate a search if they fail to show up at the expected time, to care for them when they are sick, dress their wounds, help defend them against external threats, reassure them, and keep them warm at night. (p. 348)

We do not doubt that stable sexual partnerships can, at their best, fulfill such functions, and that doing so is a good thing. What grabbed our attention was the dreamy prose that thoughts of coupling seemed to inspire, and the strange implication that people without a stable sexual relationship are wandering adrift with open wounds and shivering in their sleep. At a minimum, Hazan and Zeifman's (1999) conclusions need to be reevaluated. We hope the next review of the issues will have the benefit of studies designed specifically to address the relevant claims.

The Social Problems Perspective

Institutions such as a marriage and family are mechanisms of social control; they socialize their members and keep them in line. In an article entitled "Working Without a Net: The Bachelor as a Social Problem," Davis and Strong (1977) argued that single men, who are outside of such institutions, are at risk for spinning out of control and becoming deviants. Unlike members of couples, who are "owned" by each other and who can together construct an always-available "identity kit, readily transferable to other locations, situations, and settings," singles are "loose in [the] world" and therefore subject to "personal disintegration and anomie" (pp. 119–121).

The social problems perspective, as described by Davis and Strong, suffers from the now-familiar misperceptions that adults who do not have a sexual partnership have no relationships of importance at all, and that adults who have not formed their own nuclear families have no families at all. Still, the authors are probably correct in suggesting that in contemporary American society people who do not participate in conventional coupling and nuclearity are not subject to the

same strong grip of those who do (see also Durkheim, 1897/1963). Perhaps they are also correct in suggesting that singles may therefore be more likely to pursue "deviant" lifestyles. Our suggestion is that further research and theorizing remain open to considering all varieties of difference—that is, unusually positive as well as unusually negative pursuits and paths. The group of people who remain single in a culture in which coupling is practiced so intensively may well include individuals who are especially likely to take risks. The result could be great peril or great creativity (or neither).

The Cult of the Couple

We suspect that one of the most important reasons for the persistence of singlism is the growth of a force powerful enough to overwhelm all of the trends that should bury it—the cult of the couple. Historian John Gillis, in his chapter "The Perfect Couple" (Gillis, 1996), offered this observation:

> Marriage as an institution may seem to be on the rocks, but romantic love has never been more valued than right now. The conjugal has become the standard for all relations, the premarital as well as the marital, the homosexual as well as the heterosexual. Children play at it, and teenagers practice it. Establishing a romantic relationship with another person, of different or same sex, is the sign of adulthood in modern Western culture. Yet all of this is a recent development, for it was not really until the last century that the perfect couple assumed a central place in the Western imagination. (p. 133)

In short, singles continue to be perceived and treated negatively in part because couples are valued so highly—in fact, more highly than they ever have been valued before. We will briefly describe several trends that contribute to the cult of the couple.

From Many Important Adult Relationships to Just One

Community life was more vibrant in past eras than it is today. Adults and children often socialized together in public places. There was also more same-sex socializing. For example, the Victorian era was a time of separate spheres of work for men and domesticity for women. The dyadic bonds men formed with their best friends, and women with their friends and sisters, were often more intense than the bond between husband and wife. Before the end of the 1800s, spouses often vacationed separately with same-sex friends rather than with each other (Gillis, 1996).

In their classic study of small-town America, Lynd and Lynd (1937) observed during the 1920s a

growing tendency to engage in leisure-time pursuits by couples rather than in crowds, the unattached man and woman being more "out of it" in the highly paired social life than a generation ago when informal "dropping in" was the rule. (p. 67)

Still, at that time, men and women continued to have their separate clubs and same-sex friendships remained important to women (Cancian, 1987). The contemporary scene, characterized by a "funneling of intimacy" (Cohen, 1992) almost exclusively into the couple, is not at all a cross-cultural or historical universal (Berger & Kellner, 1964; D'Emilio & Freedman, 1988; Gillis, 1996).

From Marriage as an Economic and Reproductive Unit to Marriage as Companionship, Intimacy, and Intensive Coupling

In the 1600s, the family was primarily an economic unit, and an important context for education, religion, and the care of the needy (Mintz & Kellogg, 1988). As more of these functions were taken over by other institutions, and as industrialization took hold, models of marriage and family changed. In the "family duty" model, prevalent in the 1800s, sound marriages were "religious, industrious, and healthy" (Cancian, 1987, p. 29), sex was only for reproduction, and the quality of the marital relationship was of little importance. By the 1920s, emotional closeness and sexual intimacy between spouses were becoming increasingly central to the meaning of marriage, and a "companionate" model prevailed. In the 1960s, the emphasis was on independence and self-fulfillment, but by the 1970s, self-fulfillment was believed to emanate not from the self, but from the attention and affection that spouses lavished primarily on each other (Cancian, 1987).

Intensive coupling seems only to have increased in recent years. It has been heralded by the self-help industry along with academics. Sociologist Pepper Schwartz, for example, describes "peer marriage" as the ideal form. Couples in a peer marriage, she notes, "give priority to their relationship over their work and over all other relationships" (Schwartz, 1994, p.13). Their interdependence becomes so deep that "they have to be careful not to make their own children feel excluded" (p. 15). The "only danger" she sees to this intense togetherness is that "the couple's isolation inhibits their ability to get good advice about their relationship" (p. 64). Therefore, they should socialize occasionally with "like-minded couples" (p. 194).

As many scholars have noted, adults now expect their sex-linked partner to fulfill an expanding number of roles, needs, and desires once satisfied by a matrix of relationships rather than just one person (e.g., Gillis, 1996; Williams, 1992). Adults in couples look to each other for companionship, sexual intimacy, soul-matery, caring, coparenting, economic partnership, advice, sharing of household tasks, and just about everything else. The contemporary model, in short, is this: Adults should look to their sexual partners to fulfill most of their emotional, interpersonal, economic, and practical needs and desires. Occasionally, they may also socialize with other couples. It is a model that sustains singlism.

From the Anchoring of Sexuality in Reproduction to the Belief in Sexuality as a Basis for Intimacy and Happiness

In their history of sexuality in America, D'Emilio and Freedman (1988) described a set a beliefs that became prominent around the 1920s, and continue to be important today. The beliefs "detached sexual activity from the instrumental goal of procreation, affirmed heterosexual pleasure as a value in itself, [and] defined sexual satisfaction as a critical component of human happiness and successful marriage" (p. 241). This was a far cry from the 18th century notions that "both physical desire and romantic love were unsafe bases for an enduring marriage" (Stone, 1977, p. 183). Twentieth century mores also allowed for more sex outside of marriage, especially by youth "as preparation for adult status" (D'Emilio & Freedman, p. 241). By the 1960s, it was not just the very young who were practicing sex outside of marriage. Eventually, though, with the rise of AIDS and the growth of intensive coupling, sex outside of committed coupledom seemed increasingly to be regarded as inconvenient, unsafe, and available only unreliably. Sex is now seen as essential to personal fulfillment, but only people who are seriously coupled are believed to have access to the right amount and the right kind of sex.

All-in-One: The Common Thread

The evolutionary perspective, attachment theory, and the cult of the couple all seem to share the assumption that the best outcomes occur when the most important roles or functions are all invested in just one person. From an evolutionary perspective, the partners should provide regular sex, resources, and protection for each other, and caring and protection for their children. In attachment theory, attachment figures should provide a safe haven and a secure base; they should also be the person whose company the attached person seeks and whose sustained absence proves distressing. In the cult of the couple, the roles include sexual playmate, best friend, soul mate, and many others. The contemporary couple, in scientific theory as well as in the cultural imagination, is the ultimate all-in-one solution. It is the human equivalent of the phone that takes

pictures, sends e-mails, records messages, receives faxes, and also functions as a conventional phone. When it works, it is efficient and convenient. But when it breaks down, then the owner suddenly has no camera, no e-mail, no answering machine, no fax, and no phone.

It might be argued that in a couple, each person is a backup for the other, and it is singles who have to provide everything for themselves. The couple, the argument goes, has two all-in-one phones, whereas the single has just one. But that argument harkens back to the caricature of the single person as isolated and alone.

Our argument is that both singles and couples are likely to benefit from having a number of significant people in their lives rather than just one. No one person is ever present at all times, psychologically engaged at all times, or repositories for all manner of ideas, skills, or advice. There is strength not only in multiple ties but also, as sociologist Mark Granovetter (1973) showed, in weak ties. At the same time, we do not believe in an all-for-one solution, either. Individual differences are important, and there is no magic number of truly significant others that is exactly the same for everyone.

We have one other reservation about the practice of intensive coupling: We suspect that it has the unintended consequence of straining rather than strengthening the partnership. No mere mortal should be expected graciously and lovingly to fulfill every important role to another human. When Stanton Peele (1988) said that contemporary American values "hold out the possibility of falling in love as a life solution, where love is seen as a transcendent experience," he wasn't praising that model of love but likening it to an addiction.

The Marriage and Family Ideology Is a Cultural Worldview—That's What's Really Important

The reasons we have articulated so far to explain the persistence of singlism are, we suspect, unlikely to be the most important ones. Singlism persists because the Ideology of Marriage and Family persists, largely uncontested. The Ideology of Marriage and Family persists for many of the same reasons that other ideologies persist. An ideology is not any old set of widely held beliefs. Faith in an uncontested ideology is sturdy and will not collapse at the first encounter with a reasonable argument. Ideologies are more religion than science. What they peddle are meaning and hope, and those offerings are not readily rebuffed.

The Ideology of Marriage and Family is central to the American cultural worldview. It describes a path through adult life (get married, have kids) and a solution to life's tasks and demands (count on your spouse and nuclear family as they count on you). The ideology provides not just one of a number of acceptable paths or solutions but the one valued path, and the one good and moral solution. In so doing, it also provides a standard of measurement and a metric of self-esteem. People who follow the path set forth by the reigning cultural worldview are respected by others and can feel good about themselves.

The solution proffered by the Ideology of Marriage and Family also holds the appeal of being a fairly simple one. Find that one special person, and you can feel comforted in knowing that you now have your sexual partner, your best friend, and your soul mate, and the beginnings of a nuclear family. Surely, this is simpler than creating and sustaining a village.

The Ideology of Marriage and Family is to the interpersonal realm what the ideology of the secularized Protestant Work Ethic is to the domain of socioeconomic status. The work ethic is an ideology of personal responsibility. If you believe in it, you believe that status differences follow from differences in merit and hard work. To the true believer, socioeconomic status is permeable, and status and power differences among people are legitimate and fair (e.g., Kluegel & Smith, 1986).

Marriage and family are the interpersonal versions of the American dream. They are painted as perhaps more democratic than any other institutions. Just about anyone from any station in life can marry anyone else from any other station, as long as they fall in love. Just about anyone can find that one special person as long as they work at it (e.g., make themselves attractive, put themselves out there). The hope that is offered by this ideology is not just that marriage and family are attainable, but that true happiness and deep meaningfulness are part of the package. To people who are happily single, the ideology teases with the myth that in marriage and family there is a level of happiness and completeness that a single person cannot even fathom.

The ideologies of personal responsibility and of marriage and family provide prepackaged understandings of unfavorable outcomes that insulate the ideologies and protect them from attack. People performing menial labor believe that they need to work harder to get ahead and single women think they need to lose 10 pounds and buy more magazines. Especially important to the resilience of the Ideology of Marriage and Family are the prepackaged explanations of the dreams that actually are attained but end up seeming like nightmares. These explanations safeguard the ideology from, for example, the high rate of divorce. Individuals whose marriages end in divorce rarely question the culture of intensive coupling. Instead, they "realize" that they were too young, or hadn't really found the right person; they feel certain they will choose better next time. At the level of the individual couple, people develop positive illusions to protect and maintain their imperfect sexual partnerships (Murray, Holmes, &

Griffin, 1996). At the societal level, ideologies provide the ready-made positive illusions that sustain the flawed institutions of marriage and nuclear family.

The Ideology of Marriage and Family is tightly woven into the fabric of American life. Its premises have settled into religion, politics, and the law. What people fear when singles seem happy or when gays and lesbians want to marry is that their whole edifice of cultural understanding will begin to unravel, never to be rewound as tightly or securely as it was before.

If ideologies offer meaning and hope even to those who are shortchanged by them, then how do they ever come to be challenged and why would anyone even want to challenge them? Volumes have been written about questions like these. (A few offerings from social psychology include Jost & Hunyady, 2002, and Jost & Major, 2001, but the topic is truly interdisciplinary.) Here we will offer just a few thoughts.

Ideologies are often contested by social movements that create the conditions for consciousness-raising. Social movements such as the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and the gay pride movement are risky undertakings. They take the inequalities that were once cloaked in ideological rhetoric and expose them. People who had long believed that their lesser outcomes were fair and just are faced with the sobering realization that they are not. They come face to face with the realization that they are targets of widespread prejudice and discrimination. The risk is that such realizations will bring despair (e.g., Branscombe, Schmitt, & Harvey, 1999). But that is not what seems to happen. Consciousness-raising is often experienced as liberating.

The empirical case is difficult to make, as social movements cannot be experimentally manipulated. Still, there is suggestive evidence that the self-relevant implications of contesting an ideology can be positive. For example, in their meta-analysis of race and self-esteem, Twenge and Crocker (2002) found that for samples born before the civil rights movement, Whites reported slightly higher self-esteem than Blacks. However, for cohorts born around the time of the civil rights movement, this relationship began to reverse. The most recent cohort included in the analysis (those born in 1970 or later) showed the greatest self-esteem difference favoring Blacks.

Would singles similarly benefit from consciousness-raising? Morris (2004) wondered about that, after finding that so few singles realized that as singles, they were subject to negative stereotypes and discrimination. She randomly assigned half of her single participants to read a news article showing that singles are discriminated against economically and socially. The singles who read the article—especially the women—reported higher self-esteem than those who did not experience a consciousness-raising induction.

Why might anyone experience higher self-esteem on learning that society is biased against their group?

Crocker and Major (1989) identified several strategies that the stigmatized might use in a self-protective way. Perhaps the most promising in its implications for singles is the attribution of specific negative personal outcomes to prejudice and discrimination, rather than to one's own lack of deservingness. Singles might, for example, think back to specific times when they were excluded from social events and recognize that only couples were included. Perhaps consciousness-raising is experienced as a revelation or an "a-ha" moment in which one's life begins to make sense in a new and more liberating way.

As a result of the social movements we have been discussing, many blacks, women, and gays and lesbians seemed to identify with their respective social groups. This group identification may have rewarded individuals with emotional and instrumental support as well as validation of their own emerging consciousness (e.g., Major, Quinton, & McCoy, 2002). Civil status, however, differs importantly from race and gender in its potential to be obfuscated or concealed, at least from strangers. It also differs from race, gender, or sexual orientation in its greater permeability. For singles in particular, the option of marrying, together with the ideological glorification of marriage, may render group identification unlikely. Yet as the myths of magical sexual partnerships are challenged, and as awareness of the length of time we spend single increases, this too could change.

Successful social movements can transform the hope of succeeding on the ideology's terms into a hope that is made of sterner stuff. Enlightened citizens come to realize that you don't need to be a man to be a leader, you don't need to be straight to be normal, you don't need to be White to be smart, and you don't need to be coupled to be happy.

Conclusions and Implications

Adults qualify as single by just one criterion: They do not have a sexual partnership. Other misconceptions can be rounded up and dismissed. First, singlehood cannot be equated with either living alone or feeling alone. Most single people live with other people, such as children, roommates, friends, and relatives. Further, although singles do not have a sexual partnership, they often do have close and enduring relationships, as well as opportunities to exercise competence and autonomy. Second, being single does not necessarily mean having no sex, having a great deal of sex, or having sex with lots of different partners. Third, being single does not necessarily imply that a person is looking for a mate. Similarly, having a sexual partnership does not necessarily mean freedom from living alone or feeling alone. It does not guarantee monogamy, the right amount of sex, or a life in which sex will never again be an issue.

It also does not mean that neither partner is looking for a mate. Although the official form of coupling known as marriage is honored as a commitment, the commitment need not be honored by those who practice it. Government rewards and social recognition are not often contingent on good behavior.

Although the definitional differences between singles and couples are small, the ideological (mythical) differences are profound. They shape the place of singles in society and in science, and seem to have produced yawning chasms between the actual lives of people who are single and the common perceptions of those lives. Participants in our studies painted the lives of singles in mostly sad strokes, while they filled in the lives of couples with warm and fuzzy love. There is little evidence, though, of such stark differences in the actual lives of singles and couples. Our participants believed that with age, singles grow sadder still; the pieces of evidence that exist are not at all supportive of that tale of growing woe. Research participants also seemed to believe that it is better to have married and end up widowed or divorced than never to have married at all; however, the data suggest that the formerly married are more likely to be at risk for poorer health and well-being than the ever-single.

Current cultural discourse also rides the ideological wave as it underscores the importance of marriage and of two-parent families. In contrast, we are impressed by the many other factors that predict well-being. For example, it is not just marriage that matters, but degree of conflict in the marriage. It is not just whether people are single that predicts health and happiness, but also whether they are poor and without access to health care. Children's success in life is not a simple matter of having two biological parents, but having a positive relationship with consistently caring adults.

We should make it clear that we have no problem with the valuing of coupling. Our issue is instead with (a) the cultish overvaluing of coupling and the intensive way it is practiced, (b) the devaluing and dismissing of other important relationships and other life pursuits, and (c) the stigmatizing of not coupling.

At the outset, we expressed our hope that the position we outlined would contribute to a broader and more imaginative science. Here we review a few of our main points and show how they can be used to ask questions too infrequently asked, to entertain hypotheses that have been overlooked, and to find sustenance in theoretical positions we have previously treated unkindly.

In describing demographic trends, we attributed special importance to the greater number of years that American adults now spend single than married. We never explained, though, why that was so special. Here's an example. In an important review paper, Barnett and Hyde (2001) showed that spouses enjoy greater well-being when each of them practices multiple roles and skills rather than when they narrowly specialize (e.g., in gen-

der-typical ways). The focus was entirely on well-being within the marriage. But if adults spend more of their adult years outside of marriage, shouldn't we be considering those years, too? What are the implications of mastering a variety of roles and skills during a marriage for well-being after a marriage ends? What are the implications regardless of one's civil status? Does the increasing age at first marriage mean that both men and women are learning a variety of skills during the early adult years when so many of them are single, and does that greater mastery bode well for the rest of their lives? Does it perhaps bode particularly well for men's lives?

Another basic point that we made is that singles are stigmatized. That recognition provides a new way of thinking about research that has directly addressed the issue of whether people who are coupled are more mature than those who are single. Neyer and Asendorpf (2001) studied changes in self-reported personality over a 4-year period among nearly 500 Germans between the ages of 18 and 30. People who had a sexual partnership at the onset, or who had developed one by the end, described themselves as less shy and neurotic, more extraverted and conscientious, and higher in self-esteem than those who were single. The authors construed the set of changes as indicating maturity and acknowledged that "the question of whether personality maturation leads to finding a partner or whether finding a partner initiates personality change, however, cannot be answered conclusively" (p. 1200). We do not know the answer, either. But we can suggest a third alternative. Perhaps what separated the people who were partnered from the people who were single was social validation. The coupled people may have been viewed and treated as if they really were more mature. Maybe over time, the process becomes self-fulfilling, as the people who are regarded as more mature also come to see themselves the same way.

Our understanding of singles as stigmatized also points to directions for research that do not fit neatly into familiar categories. If it is desirable not only to be coupled but also to be seen as coupled, then that should have implications for the distributions of people in public social life. For example, the number of people who venture out to restaurants or movies alone should be suspiciously low. If people such as servers feel pity for the sad lot of solo diners, then they might hide those diners in the back of the restaurant or serve them especially quickly.

The last of our basic points we discuss is the importance of relationships other than sexual partnerships and the importance of other life pursuits. With that in mind, we can address old issues in new ways. For example, the study of sexual partnerships is overwhelmingly the study of just the two people in the partnership. We ask questions such as: What brings romantic partners together? What brings them even closer? Who among them will marry? Who will stay together? We

are far less likely to pose other questions: What are the implications of intensive coupling for the nurturing of other relationships? How might relationship health differ if we maintained a more diversified relationship portfolio instead of investing so intensively in just one person? What are the implications of intensive coupling for health and well-being after the sexual partnership has ended?

The potential importance of a variety of relationships suggests a question that should routinely be asked on hearing about the virtues of sexual partnerships: Are other relationships equally virtuous? For example, Mikulincer and his colleagues have argued powerfully for the role of sexual partnerships as terror management mechanisms (Mikulincer, Florian, & Hirschberger, 2003). We would ask whether other close relationships could serve a similar function. If the answer in contemporary American society turned out to be "no," then we would ask a broader question: Are sexual partnerships inherently special in their existential powers, or are they special only in particular cultures and at particular times (e.g., when coupling is glorified and practiced intensively)?

When we take seriously a whole panoply of relationships, then we can find new sources of intellectual stimulation in arenas we already visited. Evolutionary psychology, for example, has much to say about relationships beyond the sexual partnership. Concepts such as kin selection, inclusive fitness, coalition formation, and runaway friendships (Tooby & Cosmides, 1996) point to strength and potential of a variety of human ties.

We will end with a question we are often asked, sometimes with hostility: Is singlism really so important? Surely, the indignities suffered by people on account of their single status are in no way comparable to those suffered by other derogated groups such as African Americans or gays and lesbians. We agree that in today's society, there is an important difference in degree. Yet we think that the implications of singlism, and of an uncontested Ideology of Marriage and Family, are not trivial. To women especially, the ideology dangles the romantic fantasy of a Prince Charming or a magical and heroic knight who will turn a sad single into a resplendent queen. In what they call "the glass slipper effect," Rudman and Heppen (2003) showed that women who implicitly buy into that fantasy have less ambitious educational goals and less interest in high status jobs, high incomes, or positions of leadership.

Another answer to the question of the real importance of singlism is a set of questions of our own. To what levels must prejudice and discrimination rise before they are taken seriously? And, who decides?

We suspect, though, that what may really lie behind the protests of the triviality of singlism is victim fatigue. When there are already so many put-upon groups vying for our attention and concern, do we really need another? To that, we suggest the following: Considering how well so many singles fare despite the scurrilous stigma and the oppressive ideology, perhaps the story of singles is best construed as a study in resilience.

Notes

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