

Examining Conceptions of Singledom among Older Ever-Singles

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Abstract

With an aging population, the host of alternatives to marriage, and the number of people who remain single, ever-single older adults are an important group to understand and their responses can be valuable in helping senior living communities and others work with and provide for this segment of the population. This article draws from interviews with 12 ever-single men and women between the ages of 65 and 87 to explore their changing perspectives of themselves as ever-single, the positives and negatives they perceive with their status, and the social norms surrounding relationships. Many of the participants saw their singlehood as a process and something that opened up opportunities for them that might not have been possible had they been married. Singlehood was seen as having both upsides—such as independence—and downsides—such as lack of companionship—but all participants expressed happiness with the way their lives had turned out. While many participants indicated that marriage was an expectation in the times that they were growing up and that remaining single used to be stigmatized, almost all respondents suggested that society was moving towards acceptance of alternative lifestyles to marriage. The responses from the interviewees illustrate the process involved with being and becoming a single adult.

Examining Conceptions of Singledom among Older Ever-Singles

Relationships have been studied in many contexts, but a sector that has oft been ignored is the sector classified as singles (Clark & Graham, 2005). But what does the term “single” really mean? The U.S. Census Bureau separates marital status into four categories—divorced, married, widowed, or never-married. The word “single” could encompass all of those categories except for married; this project chooses to focus on those who have never been married and explores what this decision means and how people in that group define themselves.

The classification “single,” even when focused in terms of those who have never been married, can still be broken down in many ways. Stein (1981) divides singlehood into four categories—voluntary temporary, voluntary stable, involuntary temporary, and involuntary stable. He posits that people can move among these categories throughout their lifetime; they are not static classifications. I am particularly interested in the voluntary and involuntary stable categories of singlehood and the perspectives of people in these categories. I hope to understand the process involved in how people might classify themselves—such as why the voluntary singles chose that lifestyle or if and when the involuntary singles stopped seeking a partner and accepted their permanent singlehood.

Throughout this paper, I use the term “ever-single” to denote those that comprise my study population. This is a purposeful choice to avoid the term “never-married,” which suggests that marriage is the normative lifestyle and those who are single are outside that norm (Gordon, 2003).

Deinstitutionalization of Marriage

The category of ever-singles is especially important to focus on because the landscape of marriage is changing: an increasing number of the United States population is delaying marriage

until a later age and a growing subset is remaining ever-single throughout their lives (Kreider & Ellis, 2011). From 1986 to 2009, the percentage of those aged 55 and older who have never been married has increased from 4.8 percent to 5.8 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), 1986 and 2008). That one percentage point increase constitutes more than 6 million people who have remained single for one reason or another. In general the elderly population is also growing due to people living longer and the baby boomers reaching retirement age; the number of people aged 65 or older has increased 15% from 2000 to 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). It is also valuable to understand this sector because the elderly also have important factors to take into consideration that may be impacted by their single status, such as retirement, Social Security issues, and declining health (Keith, 1986; Tamborini, 2007).

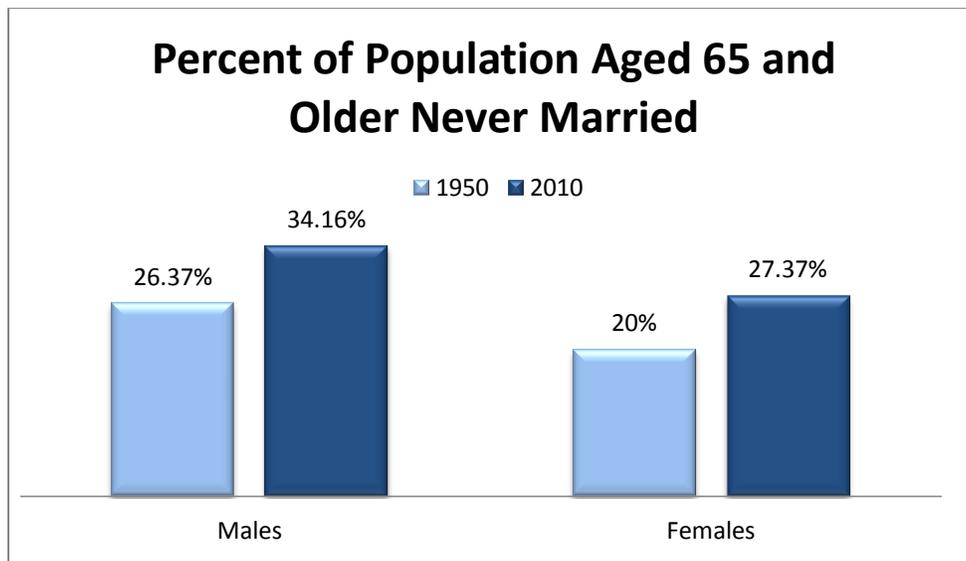


Figure 1: U.S. Census Bureau (2010).

Marriage used to be seen as the typical rite of passage for adults (Popenoe & Whitehead, 1999) and signaled a transition from childhood to adulthood (Goldscheider & Waite, 1986). Until recently, many people followed similar life paths and pregnancy typically came after marriage. Today, these paths are more varied, and other life events—such as a career—can signal the transition to adulthood, while more and more pregnancies are occurring outside of

marriage (Popenoe & Whitehead, 1999). Society has also become more accepting of those who remain ever-single and people who end up remaining single involuntarily are less bothered by their status (Thornton & Freedman, 1982). Even though attitudes toward marriage are changing, this rite is still a life path valued by many people; however, instead of being the only legitimate choice, it is just part of a range of options from which people can choose (Cherlin, 2005). The companionship and shared loved that a marriage provides is still desired by many people (Cherlin, 2005).

The role of women in the family and workplace has also changed dramatically over the years (Bianchi, 2011). More women are entering the workforce; women are also spending less time on parental leave and are going back to work more quickly after having a child. The gender roles and dynamics within families have been shifting over time, from marriages being male-dominated with fathers having the run of the household to a more equal role-sharing partnership (Dunn, 1960). Ideas have also shifted in terms of education—women face a greater expectation to pursue higher education, just like their male counterparts (Dunn, 1960). Single people, especially single women, have been able to realize more of the economic benefits and freedom due to their increasing self-sufficiency and more prominent professional roles that previously only married people experienced with their dual incomes (Thornton & Freedman, 1982).

Besides the increase in the number of people who remain ever-single, whether it be voluntarily or involuntarily, four substantial changes surrounding marriage include couples cohabitating without getting married, the increased acceptance of same-sex marriages, the increasing divorce rate, and the rising number of children born to unmarried mothers (Cherlin, 2004), and these factors can affect people's decisions to remain single. Siegel (1995) conducted interviews with single mothers to find out their motivations for doing so; many indicated that

they had always had a desire to be a mother. A few single mothers also stated that they preferred to control their child-rearing in their own way without worrying about what a spouse thought. The increasing prevalence of divorce in American society, whether witnessed firsthand by people in close friends or family or experienced through publicity about rising divorce rates, may change people's perceptions of marriage and cause them to reevaluate whether marriage is the most productive choice for them (Thornton & Freedman, 1982).

Lifestyle and Choices of Singles

Previous studies have indicated the perception of a variety of positive or negative aspects of staying single (see Baumbusch, 2004; Dalton, 1992; Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003).

Independence and freedom in decision making and with regards to social activities were cited benefits of being single (Baumbusch, 2004). Reynolds and Wetherell (2003) found that single women particularly liked making decisions without having to consider someone else's opinion. Being single is also thought to enable people to become more self-reliant and do things on their own (Dalton, 1992). Some of the perceived negative aspects included a lack of companionship and intimacy, financial constraints (Baumbusch, 2004), loneliness, and not having someone around to help when it was needed (Dalton, 1992). Social exclusion and vulnerability in being alone were also considered drawbacks of being single (Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003).

Parental attitudes toward marriage can also affect their children's thoughts on the subject, especially in terms of importance placed on marriage. Young adults take their parents' goals for them into account when making decisions about marriage (Willoughby, Carroll, Vitas, & Hill, 2012), which suggests that parents' attitudes can cause their children to have certain expectations for themselves about entering into marriage. Social and cultural constructions can also affect the

way people think about marriage and remaining single, in terms of generally accepted norms or pressure from friends to settle down with a romantic partner (Baumbusch, 2004).

Besides parental attitudes or social contexts, there are various other factors that come into play that could determine if someone marries or stays single. Frazier, Arikian, Benson, Losoff, and Maurer (1996) suggest that remaining single can be a result of “barriers,” rather than a conscious choice to do so—such as difficulty meeting partners rather than actively choosing to not marry because of a career decision or something similar. Additionally, people may have not found “the one” or did not feel particularly attracted to any partners they have had. In some cases, though, people may also prefer the freedom and independence of being single or want to pursue a career or hobby more than marriage (Nadelson & Notman, 1981). Gordon (2003) suggests that women who are well-educated or financially secure may be more likely to stay single, which begs the question as to whether those characteristics affected a choice to stay single or if women decided to pursue certain options because they were single. Being single could also open up opportunities that people may not have had access to if they had been married, despite whether singlehood was a conscious choice (Dalton, 1992). In many cases, singleness is seen as a trade-off, where negative stereotypes and lack of a spouse may be justified by an ability to further one’s career or pursue other options (Baumbusch, 2004; Dalton, 1992).

Several researchers have asserted that married people have health advantages over their single counterparts (for examples see Shapiro & Keyes, 2008; Verbrugge, 1979). Two of the most important sources of support to people throughout their adult lives are their spouses or children (Wu & Pollard, 1998). But does that mean married people are always better off in terms of well-being, since ever-singles lack spouses and, in most cases, children? Shapiro & Keyes (2008) found no statistically significant differences between married and unmarried participants

in terms of their social well-being and related mental health considerations. This could be because siblings and friends of ever-singles can step in to provide emotional support as well as help with various tasks and practical matters that must be considered (Wu & Pollard, 1998). Relationships with siblings typically become stronger over time and a study looking at mentally ill participants found that adult siblings were willing to step in and provide support for unmarried individuals when needed, especially after their parents had passed away (Horwitz, 1993). Also, Waldron, Hughes, and Brooks (1996) found that marriage only led to better health outcomes for women without jobs; they suggest that a job may provide an unmarried woman with the financial or social support she may lack from a spouse.

Pets can also provide social support for their owners, especially because people tend to treat their pets as people, too (Cline, 2010). Dog ownership has more beneficial effects on well-being for single people over married people and for women over men, likely explained by *role enhancement theory*, where people want to fulfill a certain number of roles to feel a sense of well-being. Cline (2010) suggests that dog ownership shares characteristics of other roles, such as parenting, which is both demanding and rewarding. Goldmeier (1986) found that, in the absence of other people, such as a spouse, being around, pets could decrease the sense of “lonely dissatisfaction” that his participants, elderly individuals, reported feeling. This finding suggests that pets could help fill the space that children or a spouse may occupy for married individuals or those with children.

Besides a lack of companionship or social support, another lifestyle issue that single people may need to account for is the amount of time devoted to household activities as compared to leisure activities. Vernon (2010) suggests that married women have more time for leisure than do single women because household tasks can be divided among both spouses,

whereas single people have to take care of all the chores. Single people can choose how to allocate their time more easily because they don't have a spouse to consider, but they don't have anyone around to share responsibilities with. Vernon (2010) also found that single people spend more time doing paid work than married people do, which could also account for less leisure time. However, singles have the autonomy to choose where and how they spend their time.

Negative Perceptions of the Permanently Single

Much research has acknowledged and examined the negative stereotypes facing those in singlehood (DePaulo & Morris, 2006; Greitemeyer, 2009; Rubinstein, 1986). Elderly permanently single people have especially been a stereotyped sector of the population, sometimes seen as “isolates” or “desolates” (Barrett, 1999). Until recently, the terms “old maid” and “spinster” were used almost pervasively in regards to unmarried woman and these terms are thought to reflect society's negative attitudes towards ever-single people (Thornton & Freedman, 1982). Spreitzer and Riley (1974) assert that these negative stereotypes are more commonly directed at women rather than men. As mentioned earlier, the very act of labeling single people unmarried or never-married suggests that marriage is the norm and this group of people is lacking that norm (Gordon, 2003). Historically, single women were perceived by others as being unwanted, which could have been an impetus or source of pressure from others for people to marry (Nadelson & Notman, 1981). Frazier et al. (1996) found that divorced people have more self-esteem than unmarried people and suggested this phenomenon may be a result of the stigmatization of unmarried people by society.

Besides parental attitudes or pressure from others in society, the media also propagates the normative expectation of marriage and reinforces the idea that being single is a deficit. The media often portray happy endings as those where marriage or finding a mate is the desired end

result—Segrin and Nabi (2002) call this the “happily ever after schema”—and women are typically seen as needing to fill the role of the wife (Lesnoff-Caravaglia, 1984). Johnson and Holmes (2009) conducted a content analyses of 40 romantic comedies and found “being single” was a common theme in these types of films, but every instance cast the idea of “being single” in a negative light. Ever singles do not fit with the happy ending formula portrayed in films, which could lead to negative experiences in their own lives or pressure from others. This may be particularly true for women because they are typically the ones shown as lonely singles in Hollywood films (Johnson & Holmes, 2009).

Present Study

Previous research that has focused on single respondents (see Baumbusch, 2004; Budgeon, 2008; Dalton, 1992; Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003; Cockrum & White, 1985) have used participants under the age of 60 or have focused on just women participants. Therefore, this project sought to understand how both male and female older adults, defined as people aged 65 and older, who are single and have never been married conceptualize the idea of being single, how choosing a path of singlehood has affected other areas of their lives, and how they perceive stereotypes associated with being single. The goal of this project is develop a deeper comprehension of the process of becoming a single adult and to understand how the activities and perspectives of ever-singles are reflected on over a lifetime. Therefore, my research questions are as follows:

RQ 1: How do older ever-singles think about their state of singlehood and how has that come to be their path?

RQ 2: What are the kinds of romantic relational activities that ever-singles engage in?

RQ 3: How are the social norms of relational status perceived by older ever-single individuals?

Methods

This study utilized in-depth interviews with 12 participants, aged 65 and older, who self-identified as being single and never-married. Participants were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling techniques. Recruiting was done using a respondent pool from Cornell's Institute for Translational Research on Aging, contacting various senior living communities around Ithaca, asking friends, professors, and others for recommendations, and utilizing several Cornell University older adult listservs, such as the listserv for the Cornell Association of Professors Emeriti. Interviews took place in-person in Ithaca, New York, over the phone, or over Skype™ video chat software, and lasted around thirty to sixty minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. The mean age was 72 years, with a range of 65 to 87. Participants included both men (N=5) and women (N=7), with all participants identifying as Caucasian. One participant identified as gay, while another had previously entered into both same- and opposite-sex relationships. Participants had varying levels of education; some participants did not finish college while four respondents have Ph.Ds.

I chose to use in-depth interviews as opposed to a quantitative design in order to draw inductive conclusions from my respondents' answers and explore emergent themes from their stories, as suggested in Lofland, Snow, Anderson, and Lofland (2006). Interviews were especially useful for this study to allow participants to reflect over their experiences as single adults in their own words. Data was analyzed by identifying common themes from participants' answers and grouping these common responses into categories. Several researchers (see Baumbusch, 2004; Dalton, 1992; Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003) used the interview technique to explore the experiences of those who have never been married; however, many of these researchers focused exclusively on women respondents. Consequently, I sought to incorporate

the perspectives of both genders to see if they shared similar viewpoints and experiences. Once I began the interviews, I engaged in an iterative process of analyzing data; as themes emerged from the first few interviews, I then refined my interview guide to better target those themes and probe deeper, as suggested by Charmaz (2002). My analysis began with open coding, and then went into focused coding, looking for common themes and patterns among the interviews and creating labels to classify information according to these themes. Broad areas of questions included: the positive and negative aspects of singlehood, social and relational activities people engaged in, and perceptions about society's approval of singles.

Findings

Reasons for Being Single

Voluntary versus involuntary singles. For most of my participants, being single wasn't a choice; they saw it as a journey upon which life had taken them or a path decided for them by a higher power. Many respondents referenced the evolution of their decision and indicated the ability to be able to "go with flow" and accept "the cards life has dealt" them. Many of the respondents did not expect this status to be a permanent, stable state of being. Even now, out of the twelve participants, eight specifically indicated that they are still open to the possibility of getting married, though many admit that finding a relationship becomes harder with age. As Theresa, aged 68, stated, "What's out there? Not much!"

Some participants found the realization that their single status would not be temporary harder to accept than others, as most participants grew up with the expectation of getting married and having children. A few participants mentioned that they worried about their single status for a while and continued to make decisions as if they would one day marry, before eventually accepting that it was probably going to be permanent. Some respondents told stories of entering

into relationships even though it wasn't right for them because they didn't want to stay single for the rest of their lives. However, upon reflection, many realized that they shouldn't have settled for anyone just to be in a relationship.

The reflections of my participants seem to challenge Stein's (1981) dichotomous characterization of singles into voluntary and involuntary and suggest that it may be more complicated than that. Participants felt differently at different points in their lives; for some the path to single adulthood started out as involuntary and later became a more conscious decision to remain single. Even day to day, the context and situations people find themselves in could impact how they think about their relationship status. Many participants indicated that they went through a spectrum of feelings relating to their status of being single. For most participants, it was at early times in their lives that they expressed desire and hope that they would get married. At later points in life, many participants indicated that they then had become fixed in their ways and enjoyed the independence too much to give it up, ultimately deciding being single was their preference. Percy sums these sentiments up nicely, "Sometimes I'm lonely, and sometimes I'm glad I'm not married." These perspectives seem to indicate that defining single in terms of its voluntariness may not be the best way to classify ever-singles.

Reflections on not marrying. While most of the participants indicated that being single wasn't a choice, it was just "something that happened;" in looking back, many could identify reasons that past relationships had never worked out or evolved into marriage. For some respondents, their focuses right after college were on starting careers and accomplishing certain objectives rather than finding a spouse, and by the time their focuses had shifted to thinking about marriage, they were not meeting the right people. As Abigail puts it, "Here I spent all this time going to school, not having a husband, but to get a career together, and I was not about to

give that up.” Rachel echoes this sentiment, and states that she did not want to have a relationship half-heartedly just to have one.

Another reason given by a few respondents was that they were not ready for marriage at the point in their lives when they had the opportunity to get married. Two male participants stated a fear of attachment or a sense of panic when in a serious relationship, which, for Brendan, led to making excuses as to why he should not marry the various women he dated. For other participants, they never felt compatible with anyone they were dating and indicated that they just never really met the right person to marry. Some participants questioned whether they were too picky growing up. Wanda lamented that her mother indicated that she was too fussy with her dating choices and Rachel said that people used to tell her she was looking for Prince Charming and that Prince Charming did not exist. A few participants also cited their shy or reserved personalities as potential reasons that they did not get married. However, Craig said that single people definitely are not the lonely type because “if people were lonely, they would be married...it’s a type.” Abigail echoes this by saying that she always felt comfortable going out to dinner or to the movies by herself, whereas some of her other friends felt really uncomfortable doing engaging in solo activities.

For those respondents that indicated being single was a choice (N=4), the reasons were diverse as well. Wanda indicated that she sort of rebelled against the male-centered view of marriage that she perceived as the norm. Craig referenced his inability to grow up and expressed his concern that people who are married may have lost their sense of wonder and excitement that most children possess.

Positive Aspects of Remaining Single

Freedom in decision making. Freedom to make their own choices was the primary positive aspect of singlehood realized by the majority of the participants and was discussed in terms of decisions relating to a variety of things, from how to spend money to how to decorate one's house to "being able to run around in my living room in my underwear." For many participants it was the ability to do whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted, however they wanted. Participants treasured the fact that the decisions they made were for themselves, rather than having to compromise or make choices bearing someone else's interests in mind. The ability to set one's own schedule was another huge asset perceived by the participants, even just in the context of when to wake up or go to sleep. Many participants also brought up the idea that they could pursue the friendships they wanted. Brendan felt that having a potentially jealous girlfriend would have hindered his ability to have some of the deep female friendships he currently has.

Independence. Related to the freedom in decision making, as a result of remaining single, a lot of respondents indicated that they became less dependent on other people and grew to value their independence. Alone time was something many participants cherished. Abigail , reflected on this point about travelling alone in Europe and suggested it may be a personality characteristic: "I think it has to do with the way that I simply am...I remember sitting on a bench once, in Europe, on my own, and I thought 'it would be nice to really have someone to share this view with,' and then I thought, on the other hand, it's nice to do it by myself.'" Abigail did not lament being alone in Europe, instead she enjoyed the independence of traveling alone. A few participants indicated that remaining single has made them more assertive and confident in themselves and their ability to accomplish and handle things on their own. Some also felt that their lack of spouse has hampered their ability to compromise at this point in their lives and a

few people indicated that they felt they might be stuck in their ways as a result of being able to make their own choices for so long. Being single also minimizes the need to adapt to anybody else or be held back by a spouse's bad habits or busy schedule.

More time and opportunities. Many participants felt that some of the things they had done and accomplished in their lives thus far would not have been possible if they had been married. For some, these were accomplishments related to their careers, whereas for others, it was about pursuing a hobby or activity they had always enjoyed and having the time to really devote themselves to that. My respondents participated in a wide range of endeavors and received many accolades in their professional lives. Sherry rode on a horse from Syracuse, NY to Valley Forge, PA to celebrate the Bicentennial. Rachel pursued education on a variety of levels, from getting her law degree to a doctorate in science. Brad felt that being single gave him the opportunity to further his professional career and as a result, received many honors and awards as a professor at Cornell University. Even in the smallest of ways, participants valued their free time. Caroline liked being able to hang out as late as she wanted after playing softball with friends. Craig, who writes science fiction, believes that being single gives him the ability to immerse himself in his writing since he does not have to worry about devoting any attention to a spouse.

One topic that came up a lot was having the ability to travel freely without worrying about coordinating schedules with one's spouse. On the topic of travel, however, there was some disagreement as to whether the lack of a stable travel companion was a good or bad thing. Some participants stated that it would have been nice to have a spouse to travel with or that they thought a spouse would spur them to travel more, while others said it was nice to choose anyone they wanted to be their companion and have the ability to just travel whenever they wanted and

not have anyone interrupting the experience. This appears to be a personality distinction: those who felt that they have always been independent were the respondents that indicated that not having a stable travel companion was more of a benefit. On the other hand, respondents who felt that being single has increased their sense of independence seemed to be the ones who lamented the lack of stable travel companion.

Downsides to Remaining Single

Lack of companionship. Almost every participant mentioned the lack of companionship and a spouse with whom to share one's life as the biggest drawback of not having married. Abigail stated that, even though she had close friends, having a spouse would be different in terms of support and the love you share with that individual. Sherry felt that, by remaining unmarried, she missed out on a "meaningful life experience;" she saw a spouse as someone you could be completely comfortable with and as someone who was always there for you and she wanted that in her life. Many participants saw being single as lacking someone with whom to discuss even the most mundane of topics, as well as lacking a support group. A spouse, according to some respondents, would have also provided a stable person to talk to in times of need and someone to ease their worries about certain things. A few of the respondents had various surgeries or procedures over the course of their lives, and the emotional support following these operations had to come from friends or others, due to not having a spouse around to provide constant support. Also stemming from a lack of companionship, Brendan indicated that, with a spouse he would have had twice as many friends because he could share friends with spouse. This suggests that, besides lacking the companionship of a spouse, ever-singles may have less of an opportunity to meet new friends, at least through the channel of a spouse.

Economic issues. Having only one income was a negative aspect of being single that some participants brought up and many thought that having additional income would help them feel more secure and have more freedom. Theresa indicated that she stuck with a job she did not really enjoy because she was raising a child on her own and needed the income. Also, a few participants mentioned the tax benefits that came along with being married that they missed out on and that filing jointly gave you a break on your income tax. Dan wanted to get married in order to ease the transfer of ownership of his house at the end of his life. On a related note, Caroline indicated that, because she was single, her parents had to co-sign on her mortgage with her, even though her income was sufficient, and since they have passed away, she had to go through the trouble of getting their names off the mortgage.

Practical considerations. End of life issues, coordinating transportation, and household chores were just some of the logistical reasons that made being single a little difficult. As some of the participants have aged, they have had to undergo various surgeries and operations. Logistically speaking, getting to and from the hospital required asking others for “favors,” as one participant put it. Caroline said she envied her friends that had spouses who could help them around the house. Brendan indicated that he wished he had someone with whom to share household duties, like laundry and grocery shopping, so he could strike a better balance of work and household tasks, without having to handle all of those things on his own. Craig expressed that the need to find a cat-sitter when he went away was the only disadvantage to being single that he experienced.

Children. Rachel felt that having children and grandchildren would have brought a certain joy to her life. Abigail stated that she thought it would have been nice to have children, but on the other hand, it was not something she was willing to give up anything to have. A few

participants, both men and women, did end up having or adopting children, which is discussed in more detail below—Theresa said that having children was one thing she could not give up on. However, this brought up some other detriments related to being a single parent, such as the financial constraints and not having someone who cares about their children as much as they do.

Relational Activities Participants Engaged In

Role of social support. Even though the lack of companionship of a spouse was seen as a significant drawback, none of the participants felt their social support system was really lacking, as friends and family members stepped in to fill the role of a spouse in their lives. Friendship and social circles became of heightened importance to respondents and were the reasons that respondents never felt lonely not having a spouse. Rachel even said that she felt, after an operation, that some of her friends might have been even more supportive of her than a spouse would have been because a spouse may have been overwhelmed by his responsibilities. Brad found kinship in a group of friends that met at a “Bachelor’s Table” at a supper club—though not all of the people who sat at the table were bachelors—and he continues to eat dinner with some of them now, even though the supper club is no longer in existence.

In terms of the practical considerations mentioned above that were seen as downsides, respondents turned to different people when they needed help. For example, respondents turned to friends, colleagues, and family members if they needed rides to places and these people were more than happy to assist. Caroline, who had mentioned a spouse could be useful to help with things around the house, would ask her male colleagues for help moving things, such as a new TV, into her home. Brad turned to younger friends as well as his chaplain to sort out his end of life issues, such as whether or not to continue treatment, if those issues ever arose.

Children. Some participants went the route of having children in the absence of a spouse. Craig adopted two children, but not really as a result of being single and wanting a child, though he did indicate that he always liked being around kids. As he put it: “I think one of them adopted me...I never intended to have them.” Wanda chose to adopt a child, and expressed that she felt more comfortable raising a child on her own than trying to negotiate bringing up children with a significant other. Her impetus for adopting children was moving away from her sister and her sister’s children; she missed being around kids, so after sorting out her financial circumstances, decided to adopt. Theresa had decided that if she was not married by the age of 30, she was going to have a child anyway, because having children “was not something [she] could give up on,” even in the absence of marriage. She met a man and they had a child; even though he did not want to get married and they eventually grew apart, she was very happy with her decision.

Many participants who did not end up with children of their own did perceive others as to some extent filling that role in their lives. One male participant became close with a widowed friend of his who travelled with him and dined with him. He also listened to her children’s problems; since he “didn’t have any children, [he] was providing an ear” and got to experience that sort of guidance in the absence of having had his own children. Brad, who was a professor, said he developed close relationships with his graduate students and took a vested interest in what they were doing with their lives and wanted to make sure they were making the right choices. He indicated that if he had children of his own, he might not have done that as much, suggesting that he cared about his graduate students in the way that a parent might care about his or her children. Abigail said that children would have been the only reason she “hunted somebody down” for marriage, but also indicated that medicine had advanced enough that she could have had children on her own. She never ended up having children, but was very close to

her nieces and nephews. She mentioned that one of her friends felt that people always discussed children and grandchildren at meals, and she referenced her nieces and nephews in the context that she could talk about them at meals if conversations about children ever arose.

Pets were another way participants took on a parental role. As Theresa put it: “If I can’t fill my life with children, I’ll do it with dogs.” Sherry, in looking towards the future, wanted to end up living in a retirement or senior living community that allowed pets because she was not sure how she could live without hers. Dan talked about his cat the way one might expect a parent to talk about a child—mentioning the idea that you “were lucky if your cat doesn’t cry at night.” He also saw his cat as a companion; he referenced the fact that his cat helped him get through a breakup and was a great cuddle buddy.

Dating behavior. Being ever-single does not mean that the respondents do not have romantic experiences. Some participants also defined times in their life when they would not have classified themselves as single. A few respondents had been engaged at one point or another and at that time in their lives, they did not identify as single; for some, being in a serious or long-term relationship or living with someone caused them to stop identifying as single. However, many respondents indicated that they would have to be married to stop classifying themselves as single. Some participants said they have always thought of themselves as single, even when in a serious relationship. Brendan was married for two weeks—he was interviewed because he self-identified as being ever-single—and even now, he does not check the divorced box on questionnaires, but rather checks the box for single because, in his mind, his marriage was a mistake and did not really count.

Only Meredith specifically indicated that, at this point in her life, she would not be open to the possibility of marriage, because she felt it was too late in life. Eight participants stated that

they would still consider getting married if they met the right person and the others did not mention if they would still be open to marriage. However, despite being open to the possibility of marriage, most respondents were not actively looking for a significant other; it was more common that they would be interested in marriage if someone came along and could accept them for who they were. A lot of participants seemed to have the mindset that if it happens, it happens. Theresa did embrace the age of digital technology and tried using SeniorMatch.com to find a partner after receiving a suggestion from one of her friends. She decided to try the site because it “freaked [her] out that she didn’t want to bother” with finding someone—“How am I going to meet somebody if I don’t try?” However, she said a lot of the men on there were kind of weird and she has not really pursued anyone using the site.

Even in later years, many of the respondents have dated and some have been in long-term relationships or lived with a partner, but “things did not work out” for a variety of reasons—a few participants felt that they had become stuck in their ways and less willing to compromise since they have been single for so long, which made it harder to be in relationships. Others just did not feel compatible with their partner anymore and did not want to marry him or her. Still others felt cramped living with another person or didn’t want to commit to anyone and valued their freedom and independence too much to stay in a relationship. A few participants mentioned regrets that they did not get married to one of their past partners, but even those with regrets suggest they are ultimately happy with the way their lives have turned out and that they are living their lives to the fullest extent. As Brendan said “I don’t say it’s my duty to be unhappy because I never married. You can’t say I think I’ll be unhappy because it’s something I didn’t want to be like; that’s not a good idea.”

Social Norms of Relational Status

Historical norms. A common theme among participants' responses was the idea, while they were growing up, that marriage was just "what you did" or marriage was "expected of you" and something people, especially women in their 20s, felt they "had to do." When asked to explain further, respondents indicated that these mindsets were just a reflection of society at the time and the way that people grew up; one participant described marriage as the "natural order" of society. Marriage was also seen as more of a concept, something that is seen as a rite of passage into adulthood for young people and something that becomes less important as people age. Sherry mentioned her observation that everyone seemed to be in twos and Wanda mentioned that certain places where she lived were very "couple-centered." Rachel expressed the idea that she heard that "every pot had a lid," which discouraged her a bit when she could not find a spouse, because she wondered why she was not finding her lid—"[she] thought, huh, I'm really strange." About half of the study participants felt family pressures to get married, especially from their mothers. Brendan indicated, however, that he almost felt pressure from his parents *not* to get married if they did not approve of who he was dating; whereas some participants said their parents pressured them to be less picky in whom they married.

A few participants grew up with the mindset and expectation that they would get married, which in turn, affected the way they went about planning their lives. For example, Abigail indicated that she did not worry about financial planning in her 20s because she just figured she would get married and it would all be sorted out. Theresa went to college with the idea that she would meet somebody and have kids and not need to worry about a career, so she chose to major in what interested her instead of planning for a career in a certain field. This expectation was fueled by her mother: "she said, well, you'll get married and have kids, and that was like a given, that was something that was going happen."

Stigmatization. Because of the social norms surrounding marriage, a few participants discussed singlehood as a stigma or a reason for people to think less of you, especially if you were a single woman. These stereotypes were definitely stronger in the earlier years of participants' lives. "Old maid" and "spinster" were terms that came up a lot in interviews with participants. Rachel indicated that, "in her day," women who were not married by the time they were 25 were seen as "old maids." Caroline agreed; she felt that in the 1950s and 60s especially, single women were often viewed as "old maids." These stereotypes were often employed in one's family—Sherry said her mother did not want any "old maids" in her family and Caroline said her cousins called the unmarried aunts in her family "old biddies."

A few participants mention that they perceived a double standard in terms of stereotypes surrounding marriage with women being perceived more negatively than men. For men, being single was seen primarily as rare more than necessarily negative. One stereotype that was associated with single men was that some people assumed a man was gay if he were single for a prolonged period of time. Bachelor was often the term used to describe single men, which Baumbusch (2004) suggests harbors less negative connotations than the terms "old maid" or "spinster" for unmarried women. However, single men were mostly seen as "an oddity" or "uncommon" rather than stereotypically defined. Brendan said that he felt it was more usual to be a widower than a single man in terms of people around his age, but said he did not feel discriminated against, just that it was unusual.

Idealization of marriage. A few respondents described their desire to get married in terms of their idealization of marriage and seeing marriage as the ideal lifestyle and something to which they should aspire. As Brendan put it, "it's easy to think of a better life; it's possible to think of all the positive things in marriage as something that I've missed." He thought that

because single people saw couples all over the place, they imagined marriage as being the perfect lifestyle, especially if your parents had a loving marriage. Theresa asserted that she thought “everybody wants to be part of a couple; that’s the way society is.” These ideals seemed to be strongest when participants were younger and appears to be specific to people born in their time, especially because, as Rachel indicated, it was in people’s 20s that they tended to get married. Another indicated that a lot of her friends came out of college with engagement rings, which sparked an interest to do the same. Some respondents created mental pictures of what they thought marriage would be like, and that was what appealed to them—Theresa articulated her ideal of marriage as having a husband, children, and dogs, along with a white picket fence.

Negative perceptions of marriage. While some participants indicated an idealization of marriage, others felt that many marriages they observed were unhappy. Something that I didn’t question participants about but came up in almost every interview was the fact that many of my participants would frequently look at the marriages of people they knew and would be glad that they did not have to deal with the conflicts that they saw the couples going through. Brad based his judgment off the children of one of his friends—he noticed that, out of four children, only one seemed to have a happy marriage. Others cited family members that went through bitter divorces or fought all the time because of things like money issues. This could almost be seen as a counter-stereotype to the idea that people who are married are happier; and ever-singles might try to validate their life path by being more attune to struggling marriages and finding reasons to see singlehood as the better path. Not that the respondents thought all marriages were unhappy, but as Sherry stated, “If it turns out it’s not a good relationship, I can do without it.” As discussed above, some of the participants did idealize the thought of marriage, but many tended to be realistic about it. For example a few participants stated that they could have gotten married, but

then the relationship could have fallen apart, which would be even worse than just staying single. Increases in the number of divorces among married couples, especially people the participants knew, seemed to help participants feel better about their status. One woman said she has less regrets about her choices and decision not to get married when she hears about what some of her friends go through in their marriages. Wanda summed these ideas up nicely by saying “I tell myself that there’s one worse thing than being alone and that’s being in an unhappy relationship. I see the insides of marriages that aren’t happy; it’s not fun.” It is unclear whether these negative perceptions of marriage discouraged participants from getting married or whether ever-singles selectively perceived marital problems as a means of reinforcing their own decisions to remain single. Abigail said, “I’ve seen people who were married and really unhappy and I was really glad I was not them, and I’m sure there are people who are single and are not as happy as I’ve been, but I think you should do what makes you happy and fulfills you as a human being.” She acknowledges that marriage and singlehood are not inherently perfect paths, but that people must choose the path for them.

A changing society. Just as almost every participant mentioned that marriage was the expectation as they were growing up, almost everyone also indicated that they felt society had advanced in its thinking about marriage and has become more accepting of alternative lifestyles. A lot of respondents discussed viewpoints about marriage as a generational thing and many participants indicated that people currently in their 20s are probably the most accepting. Rachel said that if you are 25 and single, people today will not look funny at you; she thinks people are more comfortable with being single in public, especially as the rate of people living together but not getting married increases. Brad agrees with this idea by saying that he feels that being single is a “less frowned upon and certainly my friends today are very accepting of my status.”

Participants offered a variety of reasons for these changing attitudes. A lot of them attributed it to changing gender roles, the increased participation of women in the workplace, and the fact that more women are pursuing professional careers and working outside of the home prior to considering marriage. Wanda brought up the idea that people, especially women, are more educated today and have more choices in terms of their future, so they are less willing to settle for the sake of marriage; instead, women are starting to put themselves first. Participants also felt that marriage has become much more of a shared relationship rather than one controlled primarily by the man in the case of heterosexual relationships. A few participants also mentioned more relaxed attitudes about sexual activity. Since the advent of the birth control pill and the increasing degree of dialogue about sexuality, it became more accepted for people have sex outside of marriage and for people to be together without getting married. Some of the respondents indicated that marriage was being postponed in today's society, which has enhanced the acceptance of ever-singles. People are choosing to focus on their careers and professional development rather than marriage.

There was a minority of participants who felt that society still is not comfortable with people being single, with the underlying connotation that there is something wrong with you if you are single. Theresa even said that she felt that people thought it was more accepted to be divorced than ever-single, because it meant that at least at one point, someone was attracted to you. Meredith said that she does not feel that single people are viewed the same way as married people, especially in terms of single mothers, whom she feels are discriminated against the most as society thinks they are "taking on too much" and can't handle that much responsibility. Some respondents also indicated that people's comfort levels with singles are very individual—some are comfortable, others are not. Meredith said that she did not feel uncomfortable being single

because she just avoided people who did not approve of her status: “If people didn’t like it, they didn’t have to be bothered with me” and another participant mentioned that she shied away from people who would have criticized her singlehood. This suggests that people may try to reduce any discomfort they may have with being single by avoiding people who may discriminate against them.

Discussion

As the findings suggest, even though all of the respondents share the characteristic of being ever-single, their experiences and history—both relationally and otherwise—have varied. Despite some perceptions of stigmatization and being outside the norm, each participant has found positive aspects in their singlehood. For many of the respondents, remaining single was not an active choice, especially not at first and many described their single status as evolving and changing over time. Many of the opportunities seized by the respondents and the accomplishments they have achieved grew out of the fact that they were single; most of the participants said they did not make a conscious choice to stay single to reach a certain goal or pursue a certain educational or career path, similar to results found by others in terms of the opportunities open to single people (see Baumbusch, 2004; Gordon, 2003). Even though most of the respondents would have always classified themselves as single, in terms of Stein’s (1981) classification of singles—involuntary/voluntary, stable/temporary—this state of singlehood may not be seen as stable, as indicated by the majority of participants who said they are still open to the possibility of getting married if the right person entered their life.

These results suggest that these classifications may not be as black and white as Stein (1981) suggests and that, even from one day to the next, people fluctuate between feeling as though their status is voluntary and that it is involuntary or that it will be stable or just temporary.

Beyond his four classifications of single people, Stein (1981) also discusses a life stage model of singlehood that could help explain these classifications. While some respondents did feel that there were different stages in their lives when they had differing opinions on their status, thoughts about singlehood were more of a process that changed based on the context respondents were in, which suggests that a life stage model of singlehood would probably not be accurate. Stein (1981) later goes on to discuss the pushes and pulls of both singlehood and married life that can come into play throughout one's life and affect how they perceive their status. This can also tie into the relational dialectics theory, which posits that there are contradictions and ever-present tensions that dictate one's relationships (Baxter, 2004). Relational dialectics have been studied in terms of romantic relationships (Erbert, 2000) and in terms of friendships (Rawlins, 1992), but not in terms of the relationship status of single. The contradictions and tensions that exist for ever-singles, such as family pressures or the idea of independence, and how they affect people at various points of the lives, could be an interesting topic to explore further.

As age at time of first marriage increases, and women secure more equal footing in the workplace, both the institution of marriage itself, and how society thinks about marriage is changing. Many of the participants echoed the idea that we are moving away from a couple-centric culture and almost all respondents indicated that it is becoming more acceptable to be a single member of society today. The stigma surrounding the status of singlehood appears to be fading and terms such as "old maid" are hardly heard anymore, which suggests more equal treatment of singles with those who are married. There are a diverse range of lifestyle options available to people nowadays—such as remaining single, entering into a union with a same-sex partner, cohabitating with a partner, being a single parent, and much more—and marriage is not the normative path it used to be. As mentioned by some of the participants and in relevant

literature (Willoughby et al., 2012), family pressures play a role in people's expectations regarding marriage. As a result, parents need to be accepting of all lifestyle options and not encourage one path over another, but rather let their child choose for him or herself.

Additionally, an attitude of acceptance towards all people and life choices should be promoted and emphasized throughout society.

The rising number of single parents, especially single mothers, needs to be considered by policymakers, so laws can be designed to help the children of these individuals, who historically have grown up facing more problems than children growing up in two-parent households (Carlson & Corcoran, 2001). Further, the treatment of single people in regards to income tax should be reevaluated due to the financial constraints this group may face due to only having one income. Additionally, remarks from some participants should be considered by senior living communities in helping to provide for this sector of the population. For example, allowing pets in these communities would allow participants who are strongly attached to their pets to maintain the form of social support to which they are accustomed.

Hopefully this research demonstrates the rich diversity of social and relational experiences of ever-singles and counters stereotypes of lonely, unhappy, or unsuccessful singles. While ever-singles may lack the intimacy and shared life history of having a spouse, they definitely do not lack the comfort and support of strong family and friendship networks. There are trade-offs associated with not having a spouse, such as being able to make decisions for oneself and having independence, which, to some participants, was more valuable than having a spouse. Further, while a few participants mentioned some regrets regarding relationships they may have passed up on or people they may have turned down along their journey, none of the respondents felt that being single hindered their life opportunities. Indeed many made the most

out of the opportunities that came their way as ever-single individuals, whether it was by adopting a child, getting a law degree, or buying antique furniture for their house. Every way of life, be it married, single, or any other option, has its own challenges and opportunities, downsides and upsides and there are certain paths better suited to certain individuals. Something that could potentially be explored further in future research is the idea that ever-singles feel some cognitive dissonance with their status and try to reinforce their singlehood by focusing on the positives or downplaying the negatives.

One limitation of this study is the small sample size and limited generalizability of the results. The sampling method used was a convenience sample and limited mainly to respondents in Ithaca, New York, so it may not be representative of the general population, especially in terms of education. Additionally, many of the participants were retired professors, so their ideas and perspectives may differ from others in the population. Further, almost all of the participants were living alone in a house or apartment; none were living in senior communities. The social support systems of people living in senior communities may differ in these groups since they are more often surrounded by others which could have different implications for this population.

Mentioned by several participants, but not addressed by this study, was the idea that family background could play a role in the respondent's decisions throughout life. This is something that could be explored in further research. For example, are people who grow up as only children more likely to be ever-single because they are accustomed to being alone or are they more likely to get married because they do not want to be alone anymore? Are people with divorced parents more likely to remain ever-single? These and other research questions examining the family histories of participants could be addressed in the future to uncover further insight into the experiences of this population. While this research looked at the perspectives and

thoughts of both men and women, it did not seek to compare and contrast the genders, so that poses another area that could be explored in the future.

Conclusion

Prior research that focused specifically on the elderly ever-single population (see Barrett, 1999; Keith, 1989; Ward 1979) may not accurately reflect population changes, such as the increase in people who are unmarried, as well as more modern lifestyles. This study sought to fill that gap and examine if stereotypes or conceptions about singlehood have changed in light of these demographic shifts and general evolution of societal norms. Interviewing the elderly provides both their present viewpoint about their singlehood as well as their retrospective thoughts about what it means to be single and how that meaning has changed throughout their lives. This study paints a more diverse picture of the backgrounds and lifestyle choices of those who have never married, confounds some of the negative stereotypes surrounding this group, and educates society as to why remaining single is a viable, fruitful option for some individuals.

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