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Singles: An Examination of Two Stereotypes

LEONARD CARGAN*

A prior lack of comparative study has led to stereotypes as a major means for describing the behavior of a rapidly growing population segment known as singles. Two of these stereotypes indicate that singles must be lonelier than marrieds since they lack a steady companion and this also results in a sexual behavior known as "swinging"—having numerous sexual partners.

As a means of dealing with this lack of knowledge, a probability proportionate to size sample of 400 was interviewed in the Dayton metropolitan area.

On the various questions dealing with feelings of being lonely, more of the singles implied such feelings but the largest differences were noted by the divorced (more lonely) versus the other categories of never married, currently in first marriage and the remarried. Similar is the situation when dealing with the stereotypes of "swinging" since it was a small category of the divorced which was most likely to display this behavior.

The study indicates that the behaviors being described are more complex than that indicated by the stereotypes and that the difference may not be one indicative of marital status.

One of the fastest growing population categories in the United States is the unmarried category. In the very short period between 1960 and 1975, the number of adults between the ages of 20 and 34 who have never been married increased by 50% while the divorce rate doubled. In addition, the time interval between divorce and remarriage has increased. This has led to a doubling of those divorced but not remarried in the past 10 years. In short, there has been a slow down of marriage and remarriage rates plus a pronounced increase in the rate of divorce. The result is that there are now over 53 million

single adults in the United States ("The Way 'Singles' Are Changing U.S.," 1977).

Despite these impressive changes and large numbers, the unmarried represent one of the most under-researched topics in the behavioral sciences. Libby (1978, p. 164) notes that single people have received little attention by social scientists and that "family sociologists have either ignored singles or relegated them to boring, out-of-date discussions of dating." Adding to this claim is the belief by Skolnick and Skolnick (1977, p. 3) that the writers on the family "seemed to deny that change was possible in family structure, the relations between the sexes, and parenthood." The main reasons for this factor lie in the functions that marriage supposedly fulfills for society: marriage is seen as the means by which such societal needs as maintaining life itself, socializing the baby with human qualities, and providing for personal needs of affection and security are met (Nye, 1967).

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These beliefs mean that marriage is regarded as the social norm and singleness as a temporary period prior to or in between marriages. In addition, such beliefs have led to the development of other beliefs designed to perpetuate the dominance of pairs, beliefs in which marriage is seen as something good and singleness as a bad state (Deegan, 1969). Thus, Deegan found that women portrayed in literary fiction were unmarried because they are unattractive, handicapped, or incompetent. Men also have not escaped the labels. Singleness for men implies alcoholism, homosexuality, personality inadequacy, psychopathology, or, at best overtones of immaturity, selfishness, lechery, and social irresponsibility (Libby, 1978). These beliefs about singles are incorporated in various stereotypes as the means for describing their behavior, attitudes, and motivations. With serious study of singles only beginning, such negative stereotypes remain dominant with serious and often unrecognized discrimination. For example, if perceived as immature, singles may have more difficulty in obtaining home mortgages or in getting an organizational promotion. Thus, the stereotypes need to be investigated.

Two of the more prominent stereotypes are that singles must be terribly lonely and that they are "swingers", i.e., sexually non-exclusive. Thus, Deegan notes that singleness implies one who is lacking a partner, is not complete, and is alone (1969) whereas the sexually nonexclusive lifestyle image implies casual sexual encounters rather than sex on a romantic love basis (Stein, 1976). These two stereotypes imply that singles are lonelier and more sexually casual than marrieds, i.e., singles, because they have no mates, are lonely and in not being legally restricted to one mate via marriage, have encounters with many sexual partners.

The stereotypes imply behavior which is attributable to singles vis-a-vis marrieds. Thus, it is necessary that this be a comparative study in order to note whether this behavior is indeed particular to singles. Only in comparing singles with marrieds on the same dependent variables of loneliness and sexuality will it be known whether singles really qualify as being different on these

variables. Since singles by definition are alone, and in order to meet their sexual needs would be likely to have more sexual partners since one is not reserved for them, it would not be surprising to find that more singles than marrieds claim to be lonely or have sexual partners. But whether such behavior is the hallmark of all singles is important to know, since it denies that singleness can be a viable lifestyle which is not necessarily always lonely and which is as irresponsible as sexual "notches on a belt" implies. In short, it is important to note the degree of difference between singles and marrieds on these behaviors in order to note whether singleness is, indeed, undesirable, lonely, and incomplete.

Procedure

Subjects

This study was made in the Dayton Metropolitan area utilizing a probability proportionate to size sample of 400 households. Since this area is also considered one of the ten typical areas of the country by George Gallup, ("Pollster Visits Nation's Barometer, 1976), the study takes on added significance. The sample consisted of 114 never marrieds (53% males), 37 divorced (70% females), 205 persons in a first marriage (55% females), and 44 remarrieds (59% females). The youngest portion of the sample were the never marrieds with 77% of them under 30 as compared to 51% of the divorced, 34% in a first marriage and 11% of the remarried.

The Interviews

The questionnaire consisted of 77 predominantly close-ended items which could be self-administered by the respondent. The presence of the interviewer was to answer questions and to ensure the randomness of the sample. In this manner, the biases of the interviewer and that of a mailed questionnaire were overcome.

As a means of ensuring the probability that all desired segments of the population would be included in the sample, the interviews were conducted in the evening or on weekends.

Results

Loneliness

Before examining this factor, it is necessary to deal with a clarification of what is meant by the concept. According to Webster, loneliness is the state of loneliness, whereas lonely consists of being alone, unhappy at being alone, longing for friends, and giving vent to such feelings (1964). Thus, it is the non-voluntary aspect of being alone that is being dealt with in this study. That is, some people dread being alone because negative values are attributed to it; others because they do not know how to appreciate being alone. For some then, being alone, doing things alone is loneliness; for others, it is precious and important.

Among the many stereotypes heard about the singles population is that their lack of a partner in a couple-oriented society means that they must be lonely. It is probably the most prevalent belief about singles. An examination of the titles in the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature since 1900 reveals that the problem of loneliness has been continuous for singles throughout the century. This often-repeated belief has led to the picture of singles going to singles' bars with the hope of meeting someone—anyone, even if it is only for the evening; even if it means a casual assignation. After all, "it's better to be surrounded by people you don't want to talk to. . . than to drink alone in your apartment. . ." ("Games Singles Play," 1973). The implication is that anything is better than remaining at home alone night after night. The first impression of such beliefs is that it must be greatly exaggerated since most people—single or married—do not go out socially very often per week or go with a member of the opposite sex when they do go out. Thus, it is not necessarily the question of doing things with someone but having someone to turn to, to call, to touch when the mood calls for these needs to be fulfilled.

If, then, the stereotypes have a core of truth, the findings should reveal that far more of the unmarried portion of the sample would note feelings of being lonely in various situations. Further, more of the never married would report such feelings since the divorced may lack adult companionship but they

usually, at least, have children for company. The findings reveal that these assumptions are partially true for the first part but not in regard to the difference between the never married and the divorced.

As indicated in Table 1, the most unwelcome experience in regards to being lonely for the entire sample but significantly more so for the singles portion is that of entering a restaurant alone. Although 33% of the married category said they felt conspicuous in this regard, 46% of the single categories made a similar statement. Reflected in this situation is the social norm regarding the expectation of engaging in such social activities as dining out in pairs. Thus, it is not surprising that very few of the sample felt some lonesome apprehensions when doing a nonsocial item such as entering an empty room. However, this question does reveal an interesting facet since twice as many of the divorced category (28%) as the sample in general (14%) had apprehensions about entering an empty room. This attitude of the divorced toward being alone is again reflected by a far higher percentage of them than any other category felt depressed when alone. These feelings of the divorced toward being alone may account for their high remarriage rate. After all, "who wants to be free when it means being alone?" (O'Brien, 1973, p. 62).

Adding the variables of gender and age to the above possible conditions of loneliness provides some interesting nuances to the findings indicated. Although the marrieds were less likely to dislike dining alone, sex differences were found. Three-fourths of the marrieds who felt conspicuous dining alone were females. This is consistent with the social norm that it has been more conspicuous when a woman does things alone, e.g., traveling, dining, theater, party. No other category revealed a significant gender difference. In reference to age, 90% of the never married who disliked dining alone were among the youngest of these respondents (under 30), whereas for the remarried, most of those feeling apprehensive in this situation were the older categories of 40 or above (86%). The final of these three lonesome situations - that of feeling depressed when alone - revealed no significant differences in regard to gender or age.

Table 1
Affirmative Responses to First Loneliness Scale by Marital Category

Marital Status	Dining Alone		Entering Empty Room		Depressed When Alone		Unhappy Living Alone	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Never Married	54	47	17	15	23	20	9	8
Divorced	16	44	10	28	12	33	9	25
Singles (Total)	70	46	27	18	35	23	18	12
In First Marriage	70	34	25	12	29	14	37	18
Remarried	14	33	6	14	8	18	9	21
Marrieds (Total)	84	34	31	13	37	15	46	19

Perhaps the most telling of the loneliness findings is revealed in the question regarding living alone. As noted, it was believed that the never married would be more likely to equate this condition with being unhappy since the divorced may have children for company. The results reveal, however, that the never-married were least likely to associate being alone with unhappiness whereas the category with the highest average was the other singles segment—the divorced. This finding may reflect two situations: many of the never married do not actually live alone (66%) and the divorced, especially those without children, are going through the contrasting situation of living without an adult after having experienced living with someone. Thus, the never married may not be lonely because they have not yet experienced marriage.

Three significant differences among the various marital segments of the sample were revealed by questions that dealt with personal loneliness (Table 2). The first of these findings dealt with the need of having someone with whom to share happy and sad moments. Of the married segments, 67% noted that this was rarely true for them, that is, almost always there was someone with whom to share those moments. On the other hand, 36% of the singles made this same assertion. To put it another way, while 29% of the singles segment were saying that they often had no one with whom to be happy and sad, only 8% of the married segments were making the same statement.

The above idea of having no one with whom to talk was reiterated in a question that asked whether they had anyone with whom to discuss their problems. Again, the singles were more negative on this element of being lonely (38% marrieds vs. 60% singles). On

Table 2
Affirmative Responses to Second Loneliness Scale

Marital Status	Rarely True		Mostly True	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
No One To Share				
Never Married	41	36	10	1
Divorced	14	39	5	14
Singles (Total)	55	37	15	10
In First Marriage	136	67	8	4
Remarried	29	66	3	7
Marrieds (Total)	165	67	11	5
No One To Discuss				
Never Married	48	42	12	11
Divorced	9	26	7	20
Singles (Total)	57	38	19	13
In First Marriage	123	60	9	4
Remarried	26	59	6	14
Marrieds (Total)	149	60	15	6
Most Are Alone				
Never Married	43	38	2	2
Divorced	9	25	7	19
Singles (Total)	52	35	9	6
In First Marriage	72	36	2	1
Remarried	13	30	1	2
Marrieds (Total)	85	35	3	1

the reverse side of this question, a startling revelation of loneliness for the divorced is revealed. Half of the divorced reported they often had no one with whom to discuss their problems compared to a fourth of the never married, and approximately a fifth of the married.

Another question attempted to determine if being lonely was something that was true specifically for them individually or was it true for most people. Again, it is the divorced who differ. While 11% of the other three segments of the sample reported that most people are often or mostly alone and friendless, 21% of the divorced were making this assertion.

The findings revealing that more of the divorced were troubled by loneliness than any other group lend support to much of the

literature on divorce. The divorced also recognized their lonely feelings as being something akin to them personally rather than a malaise characteristic of society as a whole. Almost half of the divorced had no one with whom to discuss problems whereas only a fifth believed this was true for others in society.

An examination of these personal situations in regard to the gender and age variables again revealed few differences. The only significant gender difference found was in the once married category with regard to having no one with whom to share happy and sad moments. Slightly more females than males expressed this idea ($\chi^2 = 25.28, p < .05$). The only significant age difference was found with the divorced on this same question; all of the very young divorced (18-24) said that such situations were rarely true for them ($\chi^2 = 22.28, p < .03$).

It is not surprising that more of the singles were bothered by or suffered from situations that described aloneness, since marrieds have mates and families. Since it was assumed that most of the divorced would have families and would probably retain friends from the marriage while making new ones, it would be the never-married who were thought to live alone and who would, therefore, be more aware of being alone. However, most never-marrieds do not live alone; they live with their family or share a residence, whereas the divorced are more alone when compared to their former state. In

sum, loneliness is not as much a result of being single as it is of being divorced.

Sexuality

Given a growing secularism and the development of new, more secure forms of birth control techniques, the scientists, such as Kinsey and Hunt, and magazines such as *Playboy*, *Playgirl*, and *Penthouse* are implying that the sexual mores of monogamous sex are attitudes which are more espoused than enacted. Providing impetus to these claims is the single person. The sexual needs and desires of singles are supposedly in the forefront of a move into a so-called new morality, an image fostered by the motion pictures, television, and condominiums for singles. In short, is it true that the sexual activities of singles are significantly different from that of the marrieds?

The answer to this question appears to be an unequivocal yes since significant differences were found in all aspects of sexual behavior questioned. However, there were some surprises.

The first of these aspects dealt with the number of partners with whom the subjects have had sexual intercourse (Table 3). A fourth of the never-marrieds have had no sexual partners despite the fact that all persons in the sample were 18 or above. In fact, two-thirds of the never-married claimed to have had only three partners or less during their sexual history as compared to two-thirds

Table 3
Responses Concerning Number of Sexual Partners

Marital Status	3 or Less		4-10		11-20		More than 20	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
	<u>Personally</u>							
Never Married	68	63	24	22	7	7	9	8
Divorced	16	45	9	25	5	14	6	17
In First Marriage	156	81	27	14	3	2	7	4
Remarried	25	63	11	28	1	3	3	8
Singles (Total)	84	58	33	23	12	8	5	10
Marrieds (Total)	181	78	38	16	4	2	10	4
	<u>Others of Same Status</u>							
Never Married	54	48	35	21	12	11	12	11
Divorced	14	40	15	43	3	9	3	9
In First Marriage	134	72	34	18	10	5	7	4
Remarried	21	53	11	28	4	10	4	10
Singles (Total)	68	46	50	34	15	10	15	10
Marrieds (Total)	155	69	45	20	14	6	11	5

of the remarried. Those in their first marriage had the least number of sexual partners; the majority had restricted their sexual experience to the person they married (55%). Among the divorced, 45% have had three partners or less.

The difference in the number of sexual partners between the never-married and the divorced may be a result of age, since the never-marrieds are somewhat younger than the divorced and/or it could imply that the most difficult sexual period in regard to partners is prior to the first one; i.e., it is easier to find or have more sexual partners once one is experienced. In either case, the fact that a majority of the singles have had three sexual partners or less hardly speaks of the kind of casual sex implied by the stereotype. On the other hand, for a small aggregate, this label can be said to be true.

Almost a third of the divorced have had 11 or more sexual partners, compared to 15% of the never-marrieds and 6% of the marrieds. All of the categories had a higher percentage having more than 20 partners than had 11-19 sexual partners. Overall, 71% of these claiming 11 or more partners have had more than 20 sexual partners.

If a great majority of the sample have had relatively few sexual partners, one wonders why the belief of a sexually liberated society is so prevalent. Such magazines as *Hustler* and *Penthouse* imply a freer discussion and display of sexual matters; however, from the present findings, it would appear that sexual encounters with numerous sexual partners is what is believed "other people" do. In order to verify this view, the respondents were asked what they believed about the sexual life of other people of their age, sex, and marital status (Table 3). Interestingly, it was only the divorced who believe others of their own kind have had fewer partners than they have had; all the other categories believe that others of similar marital status have had more sexual partners than they have had. Excluding the divorced, three-fourths of the sample have had three or less sexual partners, but only three-fifths believe that others of the same status have had so few partners. On the other hand, a sixth believe that others have had at least 11 sexual partners, which is 6% more

than those who have actually had this many partners. Whereas the divorced believe that other divorced persons have not had as many sexual partners—14% of the divorced believed that other divorced have had fewer partners than they have had. In sum, the divorced when compared to the other categories believe that they are less sexually exclusive.

A total of 70% of the sample had three partners or less, but only 60% of the sample believe others have this few sexual partners. On the other side of the picture, 11% note having personally had at least 11 sexual partners, but 15% believe that others have had at least this number of partners. Thus, not very many people of the sample have had a large number of sexual partners nor do they believe that others have had a large number of sexual partners. It would appear that the belief of a sexual revolution is based more on the openness of sexual discussion than it is on reality.

The prevalent belief is that it is the males who are more likely to participate with numerous sex partners. For the never-married and those in their first marriage, this appears to be true but no such significant differences were found among the divorced or remarried. In sum, among those categories who have few persons noting numerous sex partners, it is usually the males who would be making this assertion (80% of the never married and those in their first marriage having 11 plus partners are males), whereas among those categories in which more of the total have noted numerous sex partners (the remarried and the divorced), there is no gender difference.

Similar results were found with the inclusion of the age variable. That is, the age segment in each marital category that were likely to be nonsexually exclusive were the ones that believed this to be true of others in their own status. Not surprising, it appears that one's belief regarding sexual nonexclusivity depends largely upon one's own experience.

Whether having numerous sexual partners is related to frequency of sexual intercourse is another aspect of the differences which may exist between the unmarried and the marrieds in regard to their lifestyles (Table 4). With the

Table 4
Frequency of Intercourse Per Week

Marital Status	Once/Week or Less		Twice/ Week		Three Times or More	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Never Married	74	67	23	21	13	12
Divorced	15	42	8	22	13	36
In First Marriage	66	35	69	37	53	28
Remarried	17	43	13	33	10	25
Singles (Total)	89	61	31	21	26	18
Marrieds (Total)	83	36	82	36	63	28

unmarried, the number of sexual partners appears to be related to sexual activity, that is, the more partners, the more often one has sexual intercourse per week. Thus, three-fifths of the unmarried have had few sexual partners and three-fifths also note a limited sexual activity of once per week or less. A similar kind of matching occurs on the other end of the scale. Nineteen percent of the unmarrieds admit to having had 11 or more sexual partners and this figure is almost matched by the 18% who engage in sex three or more times per week. Thus, for the unmarried, there appears to be a relationship between the number of sexual partners and the amount of sexual activity. As might be expected, such is not the situation with the married categories. Whereas very few of them noted having a large number of sexual partners (5%), 27% claimed a sexual activity of three or more times per week. It is seen in these significant differences that the "swinging singles" label in regards to the number of sexual partners applies to a small percentage of mostly the divorced, and that such activity has little to do with the actual amount of sexual participation per week.

The situation described above appears to be little changed by adding the gender and age variables. Only those in their first

marriage reveal a gender difference, and this was very slight. Of those first marrieds noting an active sexual participation of three or more times per week, 52% were males. An interesting difference in regard to age is found with the married aggregates. Among the remarried, the most active are the middle aged (30-49) since they comprise 80% of those asserting such an active sexual life whereas there is a decline in sexual activity among the first marrieds of this age.

The final question in this examination of the sexual lifestyles of the sample deals with the end all product of such sexual activity—the question of sexual satisfaction (Table 5). Although there is a significant difference between the various categories in regards to sexual satisfaction, it would appear that it has little to do with either the number of sexual partners or the rate of sexual participation. More of the divorced personally had more sexual partners, more of them also had a higher weekly sexual participation rate, but also, more of the divorced than any other category were very dissatisfied with their sex life (14%). The numbers among the married categories being very satisfied with their sex life were significantly higher than the unmarried categories despite their avowed lesser number of sexual partners.

Table 5
Reported Level of Sexual Satisfaction

Marital Status	Very Satisfied		Somewhat Satisfied		Neutral		Somewhat Dissatisfied		Very Dissatisfied	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Never Married	26	23	29	26	36	32	13	12	7	6
Divorced	12	33	10	28	8	22	1	3	5	14
In First Marriage	89	44	69	34	32	16	9	5	2	1
Remarried	22	52	13	31	5	12	2	5	0	0
Singles (Total)	38	26	39	27	44	30	14	10	12	8
Marrieds (Total)	111	46	82	34	37	15	11	5	2	1

This examination of the sexual lifestyles of the various segments of the sample would show that the "grass is greener" belief about singles and their sexual activity is not true in most cases, and most important, may not be necessarily desirable in regards to sexual satisfaction. The swinging idea may be more of an outcome of today's freer discussion of sexual matters. This idea is reiterated in two questions asked of singles only. The first indicated a willingness among singles to engage in sexual relations without marriage since one-half of the singles do not need love to have sexual relations. The second notes that this is not a sign of a morally abandoned sexuality since three-fourths would not engage in intimate relations as the price of a date.

Discussion

Shifting personal preferences have thrust upon the scene a large singles population and with it a need to know more about this growing aggregate. Prior scientific study of this aggregate was limited due to a rapid rise in the marriage rates in the fifties and sixties which made it appear that singles were merely in transition to or between marriages. Accompanying this lack of scientific information was the "common sense" ideas of why people were single and what it was like to be single. These common sense thoughts resulted in stereotypes; epitomized in such terms as "old maid," "mamma's boy," the lonely individual, and the "swinger." This study provides information concerning the question, "Are singles lonelier and more sexually active than marrieds?"

The stereotype on loneliness was shown to be mostly true; that is, more single than marrieds felt conspicuous about entering a restaurant alone and more felt apprehensive in regards to entering an empty room. More of them also had no one with whom to share happy and sad moments and no one with whom to discuss their problems. These findings may be construed by the non-sociologist as trumpeting the obvious. However, the degree of difference between the two married categories was not so obvious, nor was the large contrast in lonely expressions between the never-married and

the divorced, nor the fact that relatively large numbers of the married also felt these facets of loneliness. In sum, the loneliness stereotype is not a general feeling for all singles, or even most singles and so it is limited as a description of feelings among singles.

Depending on your point of view, the other stereotype of sexual "swinging" was shown to be upheld if utilizing a public stereotype which indicates that singles have more sexual partners. However, the stereotype as applied to singles is a fantasy stereotype regarding the behavior of singles and not one in which singles are compared to marrieds. In this sense, the stereotype was shown to be limited to less than 20% of the singles and was shown to be more a phenomenon of the divorced rather than a situation of singles versus married behavior. Finally, the very limited number of significant differences found on a gender or age basis, reveals these findings to be a difference based on marital status, especially in regards to the divorced. In sum, if a person is sexually non-exclusive, the person is more likely to be divorced. Also, any given single is unlikely to be a swinger; swingers are a minority and appear in all of the categories examined.

The findings indicate that there are distinct differences on various items among the categories of singles and to a somewhat lesser degree for the married categories as well. Thus, the stereotypes being applied to this population aggregate may, like most stereotypes, have a grain of truth, but their application to the total population of singles is more misleading than revealing and the resulting discrimination may be harmful.

These findings also raise questions as to how to deal with stereotypes of loneliness and sexual swinging. Perhaps it explains why singles are seemingly turning away from the bar scene and turning instead to organizations designed to fill their personal needs by providing closeness and insights into the problems of singles via small group discussions. Through further study, perhaps a seeming paradox can be answered: if singles—whether never married or divorced—are more lonely and do not seemingly enjoy their sexual freedom, then why have they

chosen this status, that is, why are there such growing numbers?

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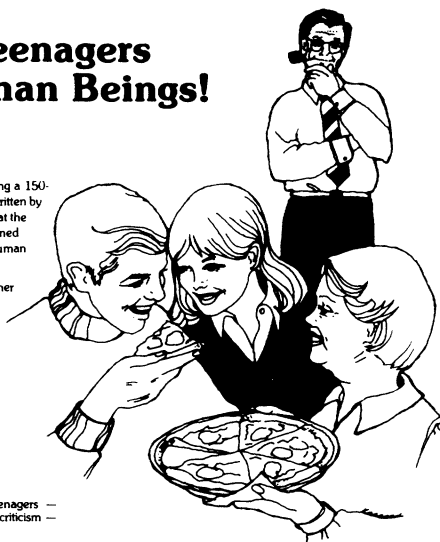
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