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Do Relationship Researchers Neglect Singles? Can We Do Better?

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We have chosen to respond to the DePaulo and Morris article (this issue) from a particular perspective—that of researchers focused on the nature and functioning of adult close relationships. From this perspective, we asked ourselves three questions. First, have relationship researchers neglected singles? Our answer is yes in one sense, no in another. Second, will explicitly increasing our focus on issues of special relevance to singles lead us to learn more and different things about relationships? Our answer is yes. Third, does it make sense to identify research on singles as a specifically new and distinct area for relationship researchers? We answer no. Finally, we comment on the term “single” itself and the category of “singles.” We think that the term and category may not be optimally useful for most scientific purposes.

Have Relationship Researchers Neglected Singles? Yes and No.

Psychology and other academic fields now include a large cadre of people who focus on understanding intrapersonal and interpersonal processes relevant to close relationships. Many of these researchers have chosen to examine these processes as they occur in intact, ongoing relationships. Very often, perhaps most often, the relationship of choice is one that is normatively sexually committed, such as a dating relationship (e.g., Murray, Holmes, Griffin, Bellavia, & Rose, 2001; Simpson, Ickes, & Blackstone, 1995) or a marriage (e.g., Grote & Clark, 2001). By disproportionately choosing to study such relationships, relationship

researchers implicitly convey that they believe these relationships are of great importance to people. We agree with this implicit judgment. These relationships *are* important to people. At the same time we doubt most relationship researchers presume that “a sexual partnership is the one truly important peer relationship” (DePaulo & Morris, this issue). Most would point to friendships and family relationships as other very important close relationships. Nonetheless it cannot be denied that when examining ongoing relationships, especially in cross-sectional and longitudinal surveys, we do tilt strongly toward studying dating relationships and marriages. As singles, by definition, do not have this relationship, this bias is the basis for the “yes” part of our answer regarding whether we have neglected singles in our research.

At the same time, we believe, it is very important to point out that many of the best researchers in the relationships field focus on examining and understanding interpersonal *processes* important in close relationships *generally*. Neither relationship researchers generally, nor we, believe that the vast majority of these processes are important to or apply only within dating relationships or marriages. Indeed, many of the very same relationship researchers who have focused much attention on ongoing, sexually committed relationships simultaneously conduct experimental tests and examinations of the same processes in laboratory settings, often using as participants single college students not currently in committed sexual relationships. Sometimes the interactions examined have the potential to evolve into sexually committed relationships but often they do not.

Over the years researchers have studied many such cross-cutting processes in *both* committed (or potentially committed) sexual relationships *and* in other types of close relationships. To use an example from our own laboratory, people who desire close, intimate relationships with others have been shown to react negatively to explicit attempts to repay benefits given not only in heterosexual interactions which might lead to a sexually committed relationship (Clark & Mills, 1979), but also in same-sex interactions more likely to lead to friendships (Clark & Mills, 1979). It's easy to think of examples from other relationship researchers' programs of research as well. Baldwin (1994), for example, has demonstrated that priming people with thoughts about significant others can influence self-evaluations not only when the other is someone with whom one potentially has a sexually committed relationship (Baldwin, 1994) but also in relationships that are not romantically or sexually committed (Baldwin, Carrell, & Lopez, 1990). Tesser and his colleagues have demonstrated that reflection and social comparison processes occur and influence reactions to partners' performances and accomplishments not only within romantic relationships (Beach, Whitaker, Jones, & Tesser, 2001) but also within family relationships and friendships (Tesser, 1980; Tesser & Smith, 1980; Tesser & Campbell, 1982). In addition, although it is easy to find examples of relationships research, which, to date at least, have been primarily or exclusively examined within the context of committed sexual relationships (e.g., work on the presence and effects of positive illusions in close relationships; Murray & Holmes, 1997; Murray, Holmes & Griffin, 1996), these processes likely occur in other types of close relationships. Moreover one can easily find examples of researchers who have demonstrated important relationship processes using close relationships other than sexually committed ones and have yet to specifically demonstrate their applicability to sexually committed relationships. For example, Fitzsimons and Bargh (2003) have shown that priming people with thoughts about close others moved their behavior toward self-goals associated with those particular close others. In their case the close other used to prime such goal-related thoughts were mothers and friends. They have yet to show such effects arising from thinking about sexually committed partners.

Many, many other important cross-cutting relationship processes have been proposed and studied, including but not limited to commitment processes (Rusbult & Van Lange, 1996), styles of attribution (Fincham, 2001), self-fulfilling prophecy effects (Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977), intimacy (Laurenceau, Pietromonaco, & Feldman Barrett, 1998; Reis & Shaver, 1988), capitalization (Gable, Reis, Impett, & Asher, 2004), the development and maintenance of trust (Holmes, 1991), relationship-protecting defen-

sive processes (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Simpson, Gangestad, & Lerma, 1990), transactive memory (Wegner, Raymond, & Erber, 1991), and how the structure of interpersonal situations in which people find themselves drives the nature of their interactions (Kelley et al., 2003). None of these processes is assumed to apply exclusively in sexually committed relationships. Almost none has been studied exclusively within sexually committed relationships.

That said, it is true that there are also a few processes on which relationship researchers have focused that are assumed to lie either exclusively within the domain of sexually committed relationships or which might be primarily applicable to such relationships. Work by Buss (2003) on jealousy would seem to fit the former category; work on the nature of passionate love (Berscheid & Walster, 1974; Dutton & Aron, 1974; White, Fishbein, & Rutstein, 1981) would seem to fit the latter category. Moreover, a sexually committed relationship is both voluntary and exclusive. However, many other voluntary relationships, such as friendships, tend not to be exclusive, and other exclusive relationships, such as that with one's mother, tend not to be voluntary. The voluntary and exclusive nature of sexually committed relationships may have an important impact on *some* of the processes relationship researchers have investigated. For instance, we suspect that how commitment influences the perceived attractiveness of alternatives (Johnson & Rusbult, 1989; Simpson et al., 1990) might well be somewhat different in exclusive, voluntary, sexually committed relationships than in other, nonexclusive or nonvoluntary close relationships. However, we still believe that *most* relationships processes examined by researchers do apply to the close relationships of singles and to those of people in sexually committed relationships alike.

Indeed, in connection with noting the applicability of most extant relationship research to singles and nonsingles alike, we note that the very term "single" seems odd to us as relationship researchers. As DePaulo and Morris (this issue) note themselves, most people with the label single are not uncoupled from other people in general. They, like most people, feel a need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). They have close relationships with friends, siblings, parents, nieces, nephews, colleagues, and teammates. Many of these relationships are close, caring relationships in which the aforementioned processes apply. Thus, perhaps the very term single should be dropped for scientific purposes. We return to this issue later.

In sum, have close relationship researchers neglected singles? Yes, in the sense that when they choose to study ongoing intact relationships, they do tend to study dating relationships and marriages. No, however, in the very important sense that singles typically do have close relationships and researchers have been focused on identifying interpersonal processes,

most of which cut across many types of close, caring, relationships. Moreover, they have often examined these processes in committed sexual relationships and other close relationships alike.

Of course, it hardly needs to be said that anytime discoveries are made within the context of one type of relationship it is useful to demonstrate their generalizability to other types of relationships. Increased attention to sibling relationships, friendships, and to the relationships people have with, for example, aunts, uncles, and parents, would be welcome in this regard.

**Would the Field of Relationship
Research Benefit From an Increased
Focus on Issues of Particular Concern
to Singles? Yes.**

DePaulo and Morris's (this issue) point that the category of "singles" is largely beneath our research radar whereas other groupings of individuals are not, caused us to ask whether focusing our attention explicitly on issues of particular relevance to singles would be useful to relationship researchers. Our answer is yes. Indeed, when we focused our own attention on this issue, it was easy to think of a number of neglected research topics that would be fascinating and potentially fruitful to pursue. We have already raised one such topic (i.e., how the exclusive and voluntary nature of relationships might influence reactions to alternatives).

To give another example of an interesting (and straightforward) question that thinking about singles causes us to ask, why do some people choose not to marry? It is striking that whereas many researchers have studied predictors of divorce, there is little or no research on predictors of choosing to remain unmarried or uncoupled, or of the circumstances that lead people to stay involuntarily unmarried. To some extent existing theories might help in this regard. For instance, attachment theorists might investigate whether avoidant people are more likely than others to choose not to pursue an exclusive dating relationship or marriage. However, thinking about this issue explicitly may give rise to interesting new theories. Might choosing not to form close sexual bonds have something to do with approaching a goal rather than (as attachment theory suggests) avoiding a relationship? What might such goals be? Might they be especially attracted to independence or especially desirous of devoting all energies to a career?

Another equally important question is, why are some people who would like to form a sexual bond with another person unable to do so? It is facile to suggest that they are not sufficiently attractive along any of a number of dimensions to members of the opposite sex. Surely, though, the answers will be far

more complex. Might felt obligations in other close relationships play a role? Might fear of rejection be important?

For us, explicitly thinking about singles led us to begin speculating on some broader issues as well. For instance, we noted that relationship researchers have neglected the more general issue of the absence of a variety of specific common types of relationships in certain people's lives. DePaulo and Morris (this issue) highlight the absence of one such relationship type but what about the absence of other types? Although in common parlance being "single" refers to not having a sexual partner, that is "singlehood" in just one sense. Not having a child or children, not having a sibling or siblings, having a missing father or a missing mother are other important types of singlehood. Studying the antecedents and consequences of each of these types of singlehood would seem to be worthwhile.

DePaulo and Morris's comments (this issue) also make salient the fact that close relationships do not exist in a vacuum. Being single implies one does not have one particular type of relationship, but that is generally true in the context of having other close relationships. DePaulo and Morris's comments imply as much. For instance, when they said most people believe a sexual partnership is the one truly important peer relationship they imply that such a relationship is assumed to outrank (in some sense) other existing relationships. Further, they note that singles are often demoted when friends or siblings marry. The very term "demoted" suggests a hierarchy of close relationships. Both comments suggest that (a) one's relationships are hierarchically organized and (b) it is normative for committed sexual relationships to be at or very near the top of the hierarchy. We believe both of these to be true. The dimension running through the hierarchy, we believe, is the degree of responsiveness one feels to another's needs or, from the other perspective, the degree of responsiveness one believes partners feel toward one's own needs (Mills, Clark, Ford, & Johnson, 2004; Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004). In addition, we suspect that most people's hierarchies are triangular in shape with one or a very few communal relationships at the top (e.g., sexually committed relationships, relationships with offspring, and one's relationship with oneself). It may be precisely because relationship researchers disproportionately focus on a type of relationship that often ranks at the top of a person's hierarchy that they have often been able to ignore the larger relationship context. Obligations in such a relationship are likely to be relatively uninfluenced by the presence of other relationships.

Importantly, focusing on singles' lives and their close relationships (which may often rank lower in others' hierarchies than those others' sexual partners and children) will force us to attend to effects that one's

larger communal network has on any given communal relationships. Singles being demoted when a friend or sibling marries is a question about how the nature of others' larger social network influences this particular relationship. Thinking in terms of the nature of people's relationship hierarchies, however, makes it clear that there are many related questions that could be asked. Do such demotions always occur? What are the implications for the single person? Is he or she likely to reciprocally reduce commitments to the married individual? Is he or she likely to seek new relationships in which he or she is at the top of the partner's hierarchy? Is he or she likely to react by feeling less secure? Are asymmetries in where people place one another in their respective relationship hierarchies well tolerated or not? These are all important research questions, which thinking about singles bring to the fore and which also have importance to understanding relationships more generally. For instance, the birth of a child may cause some husbands and friends to feel demoted in the new mothers' hierarchies, much as a person may feel demoted when a sibling marries.

Thinking more broadly about social networks may also suggest theoretically based answers to the origin of some of the negative stereotypes of singles to which DePaulo and Morris (this issue) refer in their article. They observe that singles are often considered selfish or immature. This does seem odd. *Why* should it be the case? Most singles do have close others about whom they care. We think the likely answer lies in the very existence of norms for the nature of most people's hierarchies of communal relationships combined with a dose of the "false consensus effect" with which social psychologists are well-acquainted. If most people do place sexual partners at the top of their communal hierarchies (perhaps along with their child or children), then they will provide the most noncontingent, unselfish caring to these people (Clark, Graham, & Grote, 2002; Mills et al., 2004). Simultaneously, for people who do have these sexually committed relationships and children, the needs of others (e.g., siblings, friends, nieces and nephews) are likely to be a lower priority. Now consider the false consensus effect—people assume that others' views are like their own (Krueger & Clement, 1994; Marks & Miller, 1987; Mullen & Goethals, 1990). Could it be because people in sexually coupled relationships engage in self-sacrifice primarily in relation to their children and spouses (and rarely in their other relationships, which for them are lower in their communal hierarchies), that they *assume* those without sexual partners do the same? If so they may believe that singles see no one's needs as equal to or more important than their own, whereas singles actually may have relationships with others to whose needs they are as responsive or even more responsive than their own. This

seems possible, and it's certainly an empirical question. It is also a question we would not have asked without having read the DePaulo and Morris article.

In sum, we absolutely do believe that focusing clearly on relationship issues of importance to singles will lead us to do new and important research. Such research, we suspect, is likely not only to advance our understanding of the lives of singles but also to be more generally informative about relationship processes.

**Does It Make Sense To Identify
Research on Singles as a Specifically
New and Distinct Area for
Relationship Researchers?
We Think Not.**

Much of what we have said already implies that we do not think it will be terribly useful to think of research on singles as a new and distinct area of research. Indeed, we do not. When people begin to think of research on "singles" as a field (or, for that matter, research on sexually committed relationships, or friendships, or siblings as separate fields), what often happens is that researchers within the area begin to communicate primarily with one another. Simultaneously, researchers outside the field do not feel compelled to read materials falling within the field.

There is another, and we believe preferable, route to increasing our knowledge and understanding of issues of particular importance to singles. It is to address questions of particular relevance to singles within the context of broader psychological theories of intrapersonal and interpersonal functioning. We have tried to illustrate throughout this commentary how theories of relationship functioning can contribute to understanding singles, and reciprocally how thinking about singles can enhance theories of relationship functioning. However, this point extends beyond relationship research. In this regard, consider DePaulo and Morris's comments (this issue) about stereotyping of and prejudice against singles generally having fallen "under the cultural radar." This general phenomenon of a particular type of bias escaping notice is a fascinating one. It seems to us that stereotype and prejudice researchers might well be best equipped to address why one particular type of prejudice escapes notice whereas others do not. Might it be easier to not notice or to ignore stereotyping of and prejudice against a group that seems to have been joined voluntarily and from which one presumably can escape if one wishes? Does bias against singles escape notice because most people perceive singlehood to be voluntary? In explaining how and why stereotyping and prejudice can escape notice, stereotype researchers would simultaneously be addressing a very general issue regarding stereotyping

and prejudice and a question fundamental to understanding bias against singles.

**What About the Specific Term
“Single”? Is It a Useful Term for
Relationship Researchers?
Not Very, We Think.**

The term “single” is used in common language. It often means unmarried. Sometimes it refers to not being in a sexually committed relationship. Is categorizing people as singles or nonsingles useful for a relationship researcher? We think not.

First, as DePaulo and Morris (this issue) make clear, the category of “singles” includes myriad types of people—those who never marry, those who marry and divorce, those who were married and lose a spouse to death, those who never formed a sexually committed relationship in the first place by choice, and those who never formed a sexually committed relationship due to lack of opportunity. As such, the category “single” seems too broad a term or category to be scientifically useful for studying the antecedents and consequences of these various sorts of singlehood which are, undoubtedly, extremely varied. So, too, is the experience of these sorts of singlehood likely to be extremely varied. Thus, in striving to do a better job to incorporate singles into relationship research, we think it will prove wise to divide “singles” into coherent categories, the nature of which (and labels for which) ought to be driven by the theoretical question at hand. This means that different researchers will categorize and label groups of “singles” in different ways and that there is no one correct way to do so. This is, in our view, the way it should be.

Second, as we have already noted, the very term “single” is an odd one. If taken literally, it implies a person’s isolation from all close relationships—an isolation that does not characterize most singles. Perhaps the term has been adopted in common parlance because people not involved in a sexually committed relationship do not have the peer relationship people generally consider most important, as DePaulo and Morris (this issue) note. However, for research purposes, we would prefer narrower, more specific terms including ones that refer to people who are single in the sense of lacking other types of common relationships as well—not only those without romantic partners but also those without children, siblings, best friends, and friends as well. In choosing such terms, we would agree with DePaulo and Morris that it is certainly wise to avoid ones that are pejorative and we believe that this can be accomplished.

Conclusions

DePaulo and Morris (this issue) have written a very broad article that touches on both political and scientific issues. They urge us as psychologists to think about issues of importance to singles. We have considered their article primarily from one particular perspective—that of researchers who study close relationships. From that perspective we acknowledge that, at least in conducting research on ongoing, intact close relationships, we have disproportionately focused on sexually coupled relationships. However, we firmly believe that our focus on theoretically important relationship processes likely to apply to all close relationships makes our research more applicable to the lives of singles than it appears on the surface. At the same time, we welcome DePaulo and Morris’s push to think carefully about issues of particular import to singles. We believe doing so will bring some important relationship-relevant questions to the fore that might otherwise not be salient. Finally, whereas we believe relationship researchers and prejudice and stereotype researchers may benefit from considering some of the issues that DePaulo and Morris raise, we would urge those interested in singles not to consider that field to be one unto itself or to readily adopt the term and category “single” for scientific purposes. Rather, use of extant theory (and the development of new theory) aimed at understanding the experiences of singles within relationships (and networks of relationships), and categorizing and labeling singles in ways that fit with theory seems a wiser strategy.

Notes

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