Katarzyna Adamczyk (ed.)

Current Perspectives on Contemporary Singlehood

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With 2 figures

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Reviewer: Dr Tita Gonzalez Avilés (Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz)

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Yet, compared to the accumulated knowledge about experiences within romantic relationships, there is far less known about various experiences within singlehood.

– Park and colleagues (2024)

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Acknowledgments

I would like to take this opportunity to express my deep gratitude for being awarded the prestigious SONATA BIS 9 grant (Reference number: UMO-2019/34/E/HS6/00164), funded by the National Science Centre in Poland. This grant, titled "Singlehood in Terms of the Ambiguous Loss Theory: The Link Between Singlehood and Mental Health from the Perspective of Moderation and Mediation of Selected Psychological Factors," has enabled me to conduct a mixed-methods research design. This research includes a three-wave longitudinal quantitative study, which was preceded by qualitative interviews.

The primary objective of this research was to investigate singlehood and its associated mental health outcomes through the framework of ambiguous loss theory. Notably, the grant also enabled the publication of my current book in an open-access format, thereby ensuring its availability to a broader audience. The SONATA BIS 9 project has provided remarkable opportunities for my professional development within the field of research. Without this grant, I would not have attained my current position within the scientific community. It has allowed me to realize my ambition of establishing a laboratory dedicated to the study of singlehood.

I wish to extend my sincere appreciation to Professor Mariusz Urbański, the Dean of the Faculty of Psychology and Cognitive Science at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, for his enthusiastic support of the establishment of the Singlehood Research Laboratory (SingleLab) in 2021. I take pride in stating that it is the first and only laboratory in Poland dedicated to singlehood research and one of the few globally, alongside the MacDonald Social Psychology Research Laboratory in Canada, led by Professor Geoff MacDonald, and The CLOSER Lab in Canada, led by Professor Yuthika Girme.

The dedicated efforts of the project team, which includes Dr. Kamil Janowicz, Dr. Agnieszka E. Łyś, Dr. Marta Mrozowicz-Wrońska, Monika Frydrychowicz, M.A., Sebastian Pietrzak, M.A., and Radosław Trepanowski, M.A., have allowed us to make significant advancements beyond the initial goals set forth in the grant proposal submitted in 2019. Through the collection of extensive and rich

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data, we have not only addressed the research questions outlined in the original grant proposal but have also generated new and essential inquiries concerning the phenomenon of singlehood.

I would like to acknowledge many individuals for their contributions. However, to avoid the possibility of omitting anyone, I wish to extend my overall gratitude to all those I have encountered on my academic journey who shared in my successes and offered support during challenging moments. I am confident that these individuals recognize the depth of my appreciation.

Furthermore, I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Tita Gonzalez Avilés for her review of the book, as well as for providing numerous constructive and insightful comments that enabled the Authors to substantially enhance this edited monograph.

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Preface: Why Do We Need Another Book on Singlehood?

In 2023, I had the privilege of publishing two significant works on singlehood in open access format through Brill Deutschland GmbH V&R unipress | Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. The first publication, titled "Singlehood in Europe: Rates and Factors Associated with Happiness," co-authored with Radosław Trepanowski, was released on March 6, 2023. The second, "Toward a Psychology of Singlehood: What We Already Know and What We Need to Know about Contemporary Singlehood," was published on July 10, 2023.

By March 2024, I conceptualized a new book and questioned whether it was feasible to present novel insights on singlehood after publishing two works in the previous year.

I concluded that there is a substantial opportunity to contribute further to this field. Since the release of the aforementioned books, numerous articles introducing innovative ideas and methodologies regarding singlehood have emerged, alongside several related events. It is nearly impossible to provide a comprehensive list of all relevant papers on singlehood published since 2023 without risking the omission of significant works.

Nonetheless, the special issue entitled "Theorizing Singlehood," which appeared in the Journal of Family Theory & Review and was edited by Erin S. Lavender-Stott, Karen Benjamin Guzzo, Susan L. Brown, and Wendy D. Manning, warrants particular attention. This issue contained 14 theoretical articles that explored four primary themes from a family science perspective: foundational work on singlehood, conceptualization of singlehood, pathways of singlehood, and the experience of singlehood across the life course. Acknowledging the significance and impact of the special issue "Theorizing Singlehood," I was inspired in 2023 to propose an additional special issue on the subject. I was honored that Professor Yuthika Girme from Simon Fraser University in Canada accepted my invitation to serve as the guest editor for our special issue, "Complex and Diverse Singlehood Experiences," published in the journal *Personal Relationships.* We extend our gratitude to Professor Sylvia Niehuis, Editor-in-Chief of

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Personal Relationships, for her enthusiasm regarding our proposal and for providing a platform for the publication of pivotal articles on singlehood.

The year 2023 introduced the book "Single at Heart: The Power, Freedom, and Heart-Filling Joy of Single Life", authored by Professor Bella DePaulo, a prominent expert and pioneer in the field of psychological studies pertaining to single life. According to Professor DePaulo's website (https://belladepaulo.com/about/), the book asserts, "Drawing from personal stories and social science research, *Single at Heart* boldly challenges the notion that single life is merely a fallback option. It demonstrates that for a significant number of individuals, single life is their most joyful, meaningful, fulfilling, authentic, and psychologically enriching experience."

In addition, 2023 saw the publication of "Singular Selves: An Introduction to Singles Studies", edited by Professors Ketaki Chowkhani and Craig Wynne. The description on the publisher's website states that this work "examines, for perhaps the first time, singlehood at the intersections of race, media, language, culture, literature, space, health, and life satisfaction. It adopts an interdisciplinary framework, integrating insights from sociology, literary studies, medical humanities, race studies, linguistics, demographic studies, and critical geography to comprehensively understand singlehood in contemporary society."

Furthermore, 2023 marked a pivotal moment for the academic community with the formal establishment of the International Singles Studies Association (ISSA), which aims to unite individuals interested in singlehood from both scientific and non-scientific perspectives. The establishment of the ISSA is anticipated to initiate extensive and diverse initiatives that will serve to benefit single individuals.

Lastly, I would like to acknowledge that in 2023, I and the members of SingleLab—Dr. Agnieszka E. Łyś, Monika Frydrychowicz, M.A., Sebastian Pietrzak, M.A., and Radosław Trepanowski, M.A.—organized the Second International Conference on Singlehood (InCoSin), which was held virtually from December 14–17, 2023 (https://incosin.web.amu.edu.pl/). It was a great pleasure and honor to host so many prominent young and experienced researchers from various countries who share a passion for the study of singlehood.

Notably, the need for extensive academic debate on singlehood is underscored by the upcoming 3rd International Singles Studies Conference, organized by Professor Geoff MacDonald, Professor Ketaki Chowkhani, and Professor Elyakim Kislev in Boston on July 5, 2024. This conference has also attracted numerous researchers from diverse disciplines interested in exploring the phenomenon of singlehood.

These developments vividly demonstrate that the need for a deeper understanding of singlehood is not diminishing; rather, it is intensifying as the field of singlehood research evolves dynamically. We are witnessing a remarkable pro-

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liferation of research on singlehood, with each new work inspiring further inquiries into related issues in both theoretical and empirical papers.

I wholeheartedly agree with Lavender-Stott and colleagues (2023), who, in their article "Kaleidoscopic Perspectives on Theorizing Singlehood," published in the special issue "Theorizing Singlehood," state, "To stimulate new research on singlehood, the field requires thoughtful theory development" (p. 380). Simultaneously, I believe that alongside developing theories related to singlehood, there is a pressing need for the advancement of research tools to measure singlehood-related phenomena.

Moreover, the exploration of singlehood must take into account various perspectives, including those from different scientific disciplines, and should engage with diverse thematic threads. An excellent opportunity to examine single life from various angles is this book, which is inspired by theoretical reflections and empirical research conducted within the SONATA BIS 9 grant (UMO-2019/34/E/HS6/00164). This grant has showcased the complexity of single life as a phenomenon and how it affects many areas of human functioning, extending beyond simply not having a lifelong partner or spouse.

Therefore, to address the complexity and diversity of singlehood, I have invited renowned researchers to elaborate on various aspects of this topic.

In Chapter 1, titled "Emotional Wellbeing, Quality, and Satisfaction with Life: Are Singles Better Off Than Mated People?" by Menelaos Apostolou, the author initiates a discussion regarding the comparative emotional well-being and life satisfaction of single individuals versus those in partnerships. The literature indicates that individuals in partnerships typically enjoy certain advantages over their single counterparts; however, the impact of the nature of singlehood and the quality of relationships must be taken into account. Specifically, individuals in high-quality relationships experience the highest levels of emotional well-being and life satisfaction, followed by those in moderately satisfying relationships. Conversely, individuals in poor-quality relationships report the lowest levels of emotional well-being and life satisfaction, closely followed by those who are involuntarily single. Individuals who are voluntarily single or temporarily between relationships occupy a position between these two extremes and exhibit comparable characteristics. Additionally, research examining various facets of quality of life reveals no significant differences between partnered and single individuals concerning satisfaction with physical health, relationships with family and friends, personal growth, independence, leisure activities, and social participation. Nonetheless, partnered individuals tend to report greater satisfaction than single individuals in areas such as material possessions, disposable income, social support, sexual relationships, and parenting.

In the second chapter, titled "Always Single Filipino Women: Stories of Wellbeing at Midlife," Samantha Erika N. Mendez examines the phenomenon of

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singlehood among Filipino women. The author highlights that modern Philippine society is characterized by a collectivist culture that values women's leadership roles, as indicated by the country's high literacy rates among women and its prominent global standing in terms of women occupying top management positions. However, despite these advancements, traditional perceptions continue to prioritize women in the roles of wives and mothers. Individuals who do not align with these societal expectations often face systemic marginalization and discrimination, which can adversely affect their well-being. In her analysis, Mendez articulates the findings of an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis that explores how well-being is perceived and experienced by seven Filipino women aged 41 to 58. These participants are characterized as middle-aged, childfree, and consistently single, navigating the complexities of contemporary Philippine society. The discussion of the findings is framed within the context of a Filipino model of wellness, referred to as kaginhawaan.

The third chapter, entitled "A (Wo)man with a Plan? Understanding Life Course Plans among Single Young Adults," is authored by Margot Bracke, Dries Van Gasse, and Dimitri Mortelmans. This chapter elucidates the findings derived from 44 comprehensive qualitative interviews conducted with single individuals aged between 24 and 37 years. The study scrutinizes the premise that young adults intentionally plan their relationships within the context of the 'Developmental Tasks' framework, thereby challenging the conventional view of singlehood as merely a temporary state preceding long-term partnerships. The authors assert that, despite the increasing prevalence of single young adults, singlehood is frequently perceived as a transient phase that individuals experience before entering into romantic relationships. This chapter specifically addresses the developmental tasks that may elucidate intervals of singlehood, noting that certain tasks may be prioritized over others. Research indicates that many young adults appreciate the opportunity to remain single, as it enables them to pursue personal goals and interests, resulting in a deliberate postponement of romantic commitments. Furthermore, this chapter addresses the fundamental assumption behind this rhetoric: young adults plan their relationship status. The 'Developmental Tasks' argument posits that young adults envision a conscious and intentional trajectory regarding their future relationship status.

In the fourth chapter titled "Evolving Families, Aging Singles: A Study of Singlehood and Ageism in India," Aratrika Roy examines the substantial transformation of family structures within India. This evolution is driven by changing societal norms, increasing economic independence, and shifting attitudes toward singlehood. The chapter addresses the nexus between singlehood and ageism in India, focusing on how aging singles navigate a society deeply rooted in traditional family expectations, as framed within the context of Singles Studies. Singles Studies, as popularized by Bella DePaulo, categorizes diverse

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identities, including single by choice, single by circumstance, single at heart, socially single, and legally single, each presenting distinct challenges and opportunities. The chapter further investigates the societal expectations and marginalization encountered by single elderly individuals throughout both colonial and postcolonial eras. Drawing upon both classical and contemporary literature, along with contributions from scholars including Bella DePaulo, Ketaki Chowkhani, and Jagriti Gangopadhyay, this analysis explores the intersection of singlehood and ageism across various cultural contexts. It reveals the complexities of personal experiences and societal perceptions in response to a frequently posed query in an "amatonormative" society, as defined by Elizabeth Brake in 2012: "Who will care for you in old age?". Ultimately, this chapter repositions singlehood as not merely a state of deficiency, but as a transformative space that cultivates resilience, adaptability, and novel forms of belonging. In an India that is rapidly changing, it advocates for the recognition of singlehood as a legitimate and empowering lifestyle, thereby necessitating the development of support systems to address the needs of this expanding demographic.

In the fifth chapter entitled ""When Good Individuals Like Myself Are All Alone" – Problems and Challenges of the Phenomenon of the Inceldom," authors Agnieszka E. Łyś, Patrycja Ignaczak, and Dominik Stępiński examine the principal issues and challenges associated with the phenomenon of inceldom, as articulated in contemporary literature. This chapter provides a comprehensive review of the operationalization of inceldom in research studies, explores the intricate relationship between inceldom and violence, and presents empirical evidence concerning mental health challenges experienced by individuals identifying as incels. Furthermore, the authors investigate the manifestation of inceldom among women, LGBT+ populations, and racial and ethnic minorities. The implications of inceldom for mental health professionals are also emphasized, highlighting the necessity for informed approaches in addressing this complex social issue.

The sixth chapter, entitled "Conducting the Singlehood Experience Qualitative Interview: A Path to Reflexive Practice," is authored by Emilia Soroko, Monika Frydrychowicz, and Apolonia Borzęcka. This chapter articulates reflections on the research experiences derived from conducting in-depth qualitative interviews (Singlehood Experience Qualitative Interview) with single individuals in Poland, as part of the Sonata Bis 9 project (grant number UMO-2019/34/E/HS6/00164; registration number 2019/34/E/HS6/00164), awarded to Katarzyna Adamczyk. The authors have systematically organized their reflections into three principal domains based on their observations and self-monitoring throughout the interview process, which they regard as critical for evaluating the quality of the interviews. First, from a technical perspective, they conduct an analysis of the interview protocol's content and assess its effective-

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ness in practical interview contexts. Second, adopting a psychosocial perspective, the authors discuss specific thematic issues that frequently necessitate additional attention and clarification to ensure the acquisition of high-quality data. Lastly, drawing from psychoanalytic frameworks, the authors underscore the idea that qualitative interviews represent contexts in which various relational patterns manifest. Soroko, Frydrychowicz, and Borzęcka emphasize the significance of analyzing these patterns, as well as their inherent occurrence, asserting that it is essential for the interviewer and subsequently the data analyst to comprehend the relational context of the data gathered. The chapter concludes with several recommendations for conducting qualitative interviews with single individuals, highlighting the vital importance of being attuned to the relational dynamics that may emerge during the interviews and leveraging these insights within the qualitative data analysis process.

The final chapter, entitled "Religious Attributions Concerning Singlehood: The Development and Validation of A New Scale in Samples of Single Adults," presents the outcomes of an investigation focused on the creation of a new instrument designed to measure religious attributions among single individuals. Authors Pietrzak, Adamczyk, and Zarzycka delineate six systematic steps undertaken during their comprehensive study conducted in Poland: 1. Generation of a test item pool, 2. Linguistic analysis of the initial item pool, 3. First content validity analysis employing the method of expert judges, 4. Second content validity analysis using the same method, 5. Execution of the first pilot study, and 6. Execution of the second pilot study. This meticulous investigation facilitated the authors in developing a Polish-language scale that assesses religious attributions relevant to an individual's sense of control, as well as the positive and negative meanings associated with singlehood. Additionally, the authors established the scale's psychometric properties, which include factorial structure, internal reliability, and both convergent and discriminant validity.

I assert that this book, comprising seven chapters that introduce novel theoretical ideas and empirical findings, will serve as an invaluable and distinctive resource of knowledge. It will offer significant reflections on the current state of research while also inspiring further theoretical and empirical inquiries in the domain of single studies.

Poznań, January 9, 2025
Katarzyna Adamczyk

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Menelaos Apostolou (University of Nicosia)

Chapter One. Emotional Wellbeing, Quality, and Satisfaction with Life: Are Singles Better Off Than Mated People?

Abstract
Existing evidence indicates that more than one in three adults living in contemporary post-industrial societies are single, meaning they do not have an intimate partner. The relatively high occurrence of singlehood raises the question of whether singles fare better or worse than partnered individuals in terms of emotional well-being and life satisfaction—a question that the current chapter aims to address. Existing literature suggests that, in general, partnered have an advantage over single individuals, but the type of singlehood and the quality of relationships play significant roles. More specifically, people in good quality relationships tend to experience the greatest emotional well-being and life satisfaction, followed by those in moderately satisfying relationships. Conversely, people in poor-quality relationships report the lowest emotional well-being and life satisfaction, closely followed by those who are involuntarily single. Voluntarily single individuals and between relationships single fall between these two ends and are similar to each other. Additionally, research on various aspects of quality of life finds no significant differences between partnered and single individuals in terms of satisfaction with physical health, relationships with family and friends, personal growth, independence, leisure, and social participation. However, partnered individuals report greater satisfaction than singles in areas such as material goods, disposable income, social support, sexual life, and parenting.
Keywords: Singlehood; emotions; emotional wellbeing; life satisfaction; quality of life

Introduction

Being single—meaning not having an intimate partner—is an increasingly common phenomenon in contemporary post-industrial societies (Adamczyk & Trepanowski, 2023; Kislev, 2019). For instance, one study that examined singlehood in 14 different countries (Austria, Brazil, China, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Japan, Peru, Poland, Russia, Spain, Turkey, the UK, and Ukraine) found a high prevalence of this status in all of them (Apostolou et al., 2023).

The high occurrence of singlehood has sparked a debate on whether singles are better off in terms of emotional wellbeing and quality of life than people in an intimate relationship. For instance, some advocates of singlehood argue that not

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being in an intimate relationship is indeed superior in many respects to mated life (e.g., DePaulo, 2007). These perspectives differ from those who favor family formation and marriage (e.g., Olds & Schwartz, 2010). However, upon closer examination, many of the arguments on both sides lack a solid theoretical and empirical foundation, rendering them less convincing.

Recent studies have attempted to address the association of singlehood with emotional wellbeing and life satisfaction, both theoretically and empirically. Emotional wellbeing refers to the balance of positive and negative emotions experienced by individuals, while satisfaction with life pertains to how content individuals are with the lives they lead. The current chapter aims to summarize and discuss these studies to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how singlehood and partnered life affect emotional wellbeing and life satisfaction. I will begin by examining the various types of singlehood.

Not all singles are single for the same reason

People are single for different reasons (Apostolou, 2017; Girme et al., 2022), and three broad categories of singles have been identified: Involuntarily single: Individuals who wish to be in an intimate relationship but face difficulties attracting a mate; voluntarily single: Individuals who prefer not to be in an intimate relationship; between-relationships single: Individuals who have recently exited an intimate relationship and have not yet found another partner (Apostolou & Wang, 2019). A cross-cultural study with a sample of 7,181 participants from 14 countries attempted to identify the occurrence of these singlehood types (Apostolou et al., 2023). It found that, in the pooled sample, 38.1% of participants were single, with the breakdown as follows: 39.9% were voluntarily single, 33.8% were involuntarily single, and 26.3% were between-relationships single.

Further studies with more representative samples are necessary to obtain a precise estimate of singlehood types across different countries. Nonetheless, this study makes a compelling case that singlehood is relatively prevalent in contemporary post-industrial societies and is not a homogenous phenomenon. This distinction is important for the argument presented in the current chapter, as the reason for being single can affect emotional wellbeing and life satisfaction.

Emotional wellbeing and satisfaction with life

Emotions such as happiness, satisfaction, sadness, and loneliness are mental states generated by specific brain mechanisms. These emotional mechanisms have evolved to serve specific evolutionary purposes, which means they do not

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trigger randomly but in response to specific situations, such as an individual's relationship status (Apostolou et al., 2019; Tooby & Cosmides, 2008). It follows that the evolutionary perspective is useful in addressing questions about the impact of singlehood on emotional states and satisfaction with life.

From an evolutionary perspective, living organisms can be understood as vehicles shaped by natural selection to transfer their genetic material across generations (Dawkins, 2016). They achieve this primarily by surviving against the challenges posed by nature and by reproducing. Additionally, organisms may help their genetic relatives, who share some of their genetic material, to survive and reproduce (Dawkins, 2016). Consequently, an organism comprises various mechanisms or adaptations that allow it to carry its genetic material through time, enhancing its chances of survival and reproduction, as well as aiding its genetic relatives in these pursuits, collectively referred to as fitness. For example, eyes are adaptations that promote survival and reproduction by helping an individual navigate the world, avoid predators, and spot potential mates. Similarly, parental love is an adaptation that encourages individuals to allocate resources to help their offspring— who are close genetic relatives—survive and reproduce.

In this context, the brain is as a set of adaptations that enhance fitness by generating behavior. Animal behavior, including human behavior, ultimately aims to increase an organism's fitness (Barkow et al., 1995). Emotions play a central role in directing human behavior toward this objective (see Apostolou, 2016, Nesse, 2019, and Tooby & Cosmides, 2008 for a more comprehensive discussion). When individuals encounter situations that actually or potentially decrease fitness, negative emotions—unpleasant to experience—are triggered to motivate corrective action to alleviate feeling this way. For instance, experiencing pain from a fractured bone after falling down stairs would motivate individuals to seek medical help to stop the pain. Negative emotions also act as deterrents, motivating individuals to avoid similar situations in the future by creating lasting memories of the unpleasant experience.

Conversely, when individuals are in situations that increase or potentially increase fitness, positive emotions—pleasant to experience—are triggered, motivating them to remain in such situations. For example, holding a high-status job with competitive pay evokes satisfaction and fulfillment, motivating individuals to maintain their job to continue experiencing these positive emotions. Additionally, positive emotions can drive people to seek fitness-enhancing situations. Achieving a job promotion might elicit happiness, joy, and pride, prompting individuals to work hard to experience these emotions again through future promotions.

Humans are a sexually reproducing species, meaning individuals must attract intimate partners to reproduce. Consequently, attracting a partner is of outmost evolutionary importance, and emotional mechanisms play a key role in moti-

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vating behaviors toward this goal. Specifically, not having an intimate partner can trigger negative emotions, such as loneliness and sadness, motivating people to seek partners to avoid feeling this way (Apostolou et al., 2019). Similarly, once in a relationship, the memory of negative emotions from past singlehood may encourage commitment to avoid reliving them. Conversely, having a partner can trigger positive emotions like satisfaction and happiness, motivating individuals to sustain the relationship to retain these emotions. Furthermore, memories of positive emotions from previous relationships can motivate single individuals to seek partners again.

In summary, lacking an intimate partner may be a fitness-impairing situation that triggers negative emotions, while having one may be fitness-enhancing, triggering positive emotions. This argument leads to the prediction that mated individuals typically enjoy higher emotional wellbeing than single individuals (Apostolou et al., 2019). Nevertheless, as previously discussed, singles are not a homogeneous group, and fitness variations among singlehood categories may lead to differences in emotional wellbeing. In particular, involuntarily single individuals often face barriers like poor flirting skills or personality issues hindering their ability to find mates (Apostolou, 2017). In contrast, individuals may choose to be single in order to focus their energy on personal development, intending to leverage it to attract mates later (Apostolou, 2017). Similarly, between-relationships singles are temporarily single due to insufficient time to find a new partner, not because of significant barriers. Thus, involuntarily single individuals may face greater challenges in finding partners, potentially placing their fitness more at risk. Consequently, it can be predicted that involuntarily singles experience lower emotional wellbeing compared to other singlehood categories (Apostolou et al., 2019).

Overall, evolutionary theorizing indicates that relationship status influences emotional wellbeing, with mated individuals generally faring better than single individuals, and the type of singlehood making also a difference. Furthermore, emotional wellbeing is likely to impact satisfaction with life, as negative and positive emotions would be associated with how satisfied people are with their lives. The existing literature supports these hypotheses.

The impact of relationship status on emotional wellbeing and life satisfaction

Numerous studies support the hypothesis that individuals in intimate relationships experience better emotional wellbeing than those who are single. For instance, research has found that married people report higher levels of happiness

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compared to unmarried people (Diener et al., 2000; Haring-Hidore et al., 1985; Kislev, 2022; Marks & Lambert, 1998; Stack & Eshleman, 1998). However, these studies often do not differentiate between those who do not have an intimate partner and those who do but are not married, treating all as "never married."

To address this issue, Girme et al. (2016) examined a student sample in New Zealand, finding that individuals in intimate relationships reported higher life satisfaction than those without an intimate partner, although they did not distinguish between different single categories. Costello et al. (2022) compared British men identifying as incels—single men who believe they cannot form sexual or romantic relationships—with non-incels, finding higher rates of depression, anxiety, and loneliness among incels, who also reported lower life satisfaction. Similarly, a Canadian study indicated that incel men experienced more loneliness than non-incel men (Sparks et al., 2023). Another study by Adamczyk (2017), using a sample from Poland, found that voluntarily single young adults reported less romantic loneliness than their involuntarily single counterparts.

The aforementioned studies often did not differentiate between single categories or focus on specific groups like incels. To bridge this gap, my colleagues and I conducted a study examining emotional wellbeing and life satisfaction across various relationship statuses: Those in romantic relationships but not married, married individuals, involuntarily single, voluntarily single, and those between relationships (Apostolou et al., 2019). The study included 735 Greek-speaking participants, and its findings revealed a significant association between relationship status, emotional wellbeing, and life satisfaction. Specifically, involuntarily single individuals reported fewer positive emotions, more negative emotions, and lower life satisfaction compared to those in relationships or married. Voluntarily single individuals and those between relationships also reported fewer positive emotions, more negative emotions, and lower life satisfaction compared to those in relationships, although they experienced better outcomes than involuntarily single individuals. In summary, individuals in relationships generally fared better emotionally, with involuntarily single individuals experiencing the most negative and least positive emotions. These results were replicated in a subsequent study with a different Greek-speaking sample (Apostolou & Kagialis, 2020).

While these studies provided insights into the impact of singlehood on emotional wellbeing, they were limited to the Greek cultural context. Therefore, we sought to replicate our findings in a more diverse sample consisting of 6,338 participants from 12 countries, including China, Egypt, Japan, Oman, Peru, Poland, Russia, Spain, Turkey, the UK, and Ukraine, in addition to Greece (Apostolou et al., 2024). Consistent with our earlier findings, individuals in relationships or married reported more positive emotions, fewer negative emo-

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tions, and higher life satisfaction, optimism, and sense of purpose. In contrast, involuntarily single individuals experienced the least positive emotions, the most negative emotions, and the lowest life satisfaction, optimism, and sense of purpose. Those between relationships or voluntarily single fell between these two ends. Although the impact of relationship status on emotional wellbeing varied across countries—with some showing stronger effects and others approaching but not reaching statistical significance—our findings demonstrated a consistent pattern across different cultural contexts. This pattern suggests that, in accordance with the evolutionary perspective, the negative impact of singlehood on emotional wellbeing may be universal, though further studies are needed to confirm this hypothesis.

The quality of the relationship matters considerably

The research summarized above indicates a small but consistent advantage in emotional wellbeing and life satisfaction for partnered compared to single individuals. However, these findings overlook an important factor: The quality of the relationship, which evolutionary theory suggests significantly impacts emotional wellbeing and life satisfaction. I will elaborate on this argument below.

Emotions and the quality of the relationship

An intimate partner is not only a reproductive resource but also a source of emotional and financial support (Apostolou, Christoforou, et al., 2023). Therefore, an intimate relationship can offer considerable reproductive and survival benefits to an individual. Still, not all intimate relationships are equally beneficial, and some may even negatively affect individuals' fitness. More specifically, prospective partners can be caring, kind, understanding, hardworking, family-oriented, healthy, and having both the willingness and capacity to have children and provide for these children and their mates. Conversely, potential partners can be indifferent, unkind, abusive, lazy, unwilling to start a family, ill, and lacking both the willingness and capacity needed for having children and providing for them and their partners. Having an intimate partner of the former type can boost considerably one's fitness, while having a partner of the latter type can severely hinder it. Consequently, evolutionary pressures have given rise to mechanisms such as mate preferences that enable people to avoid the former and seek the latter (Buss, 2016). Yet, individuals may often find themselves with mates detrimental to their fitness.

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There are various reasons for this, one being that mate-screening mechanisms, like all mechanisms, are not foolproof and may sometimes fail to detect undesirable qualities in a prospective mate. Another reason is deception; individuals with traits impairing fitness, such as abusiveness, create selection pressures for mechanisms that can screen for these traits in potential mates. The existence of such screening mechanisms, in turn, creates evolutionary pressure for mechanisms that allow individuals to conceal these undesirable traits. While people may be adept at hiding these traits, they often become apparent as the relationship develops. As a result, individuals may find themselves in relationships with partners who differ from their initial perceptions (see Haselton et al., 2005).

Furthermore, individuals' traits can change over time. Healthy people may become unhealthy, financially stable people may encounter financial difficulties, and so forth. Thus, even if screening mechanisms worked well initially and individuals found fitness-enhancing partners, there is no guarantee these partners will remain advantageous. For instance, partners may suffer an illness, such as a stroke, that permanently affects their ability to provide for their family. Conversely, individuals may improve in several aspects—such as obtaining better education, securing a higher-paying job, or enhancing their appearance—thus potentially attracting better partners than their current ones. In such cases, staying with the current partner may decrease fitness, as individuals forgo the opportunity to be with a better one. Additionally, people transition through different life stages, and a partner suitable for one stage may not fit another. For example, a youthful individual seeking relationship experience and fulfilling sexual desires may find a fun, non-family-oriented partner ideal. Yet, as they mature and seek to settle down and start a family, such a partner may no longer suit their needs.

In total, while people are likely to form intimate relationships that promote their fitness, this is not always the case, and they may find themselves in relationships that compromise their fitness. Emotional mechanisms evolved to monitor fitness play a crucial role in motivating corrective actions, such as ending a fitness-impairing relationship and finding a more suitable partner. In particular, when individuals are in a fitness-compromising relationship, negative emotions like despair, unhappiness, and anger may arise, motivating them to take corrective action to protect their fitness (Apostolou et al., 2024). Remembering these emotions can also make people more cautious in future mate selections to avoid similar situations. Conversely, in fitness-enhancing relationships, positive emotions like happiness and satisfaction encourage individuals to maintain the relationship and take measures to safeguard it. The memory of these positive emotions can also drive individuals to seek future fitness-enhancing relationships to relive these experiences.

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Overall, partnered individuals are not a homogeneous group; they vary in the fitness derived from their relationships. Consequently, they will also differ in emotional wellbeing and life satisfaction. Specifically, individuals in fitness-enhancing or good relationships will likely experience the highest emotional wellbeing, followed by those in moderately beneficial relationships, voluntarily single or between-relationships individuals, involuntarily single individuals, and those in fitness-impairing or bad relationships. The latter group may be worse off than singles, as they not only need to find a fitness-enhancing mate but also face the additional challenge of exiting their current relationship. Empirical data support these predictions.

The impact of relationship quality on emotional wellbeing and life satisfaction

In the cross-cultural study of 12 nations discussed above (Apostolou et al., 2024), satisfaction with relationships was measured among participants who indicated they were partnered (in a relationship or married). Based on their responses, participants who were very satisfied with their relationships were classified as being in a "good" one, those who were not satisfied as being in a "bad" one, and the remaining as being in a "moderate" one. Thus, we used relationship satisfaction as a proxy for the quality, and thereby the fitness, of the relationship. We then compared the emotional wellbeing of individuals in different categories of singlehood with those in relationships of varying quality.

Participants in a good intimate relationship reported the highest levels of positive emotions, the lowest levels of negative emotions, and the greatest optimism, meaning, and life satisfaction compared to other participants. They were followed by those in moderate quality relationships, who in turn were followed by individuals between relationships or voluntarily single. Near the bottom of the emotional wellbeing hierarchy were involuntarily single individuals, while those in a bad quality intimate relationship were at the bottom. Although individuals in bad relationships fared worse than involuntarily single individuals, the two groups were closely matched on most measures. These findings were generally consistent across the countries in our sample. To my knowledge, this is the only study comparing different categories of singles with people in various categories of relationship quality. More studies are necessary to confirm our findings, but our study strongly suggests that relationship is significantly associated emotional wellbeing and life satisfaction.

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How large is the impact of relationship status on emotional wellbeing and life satisfaction?

The research discussed above (i.e., Apostolou et al., 2024) indicates that relationship status is associated with emotional wellbeing and life satisfaction. The next question is how substantial this association is—that is, whether being in different categories of relationship status make a small or big difference on where people stand in these dimensions. Without considering relationship quality, the effect size was generally small; however, when quality was considered, the effect size ranged from small to moderate. Thus, relationship status, considering quality, has a strong association with people's emotional wellbeing. It is also important to note that for certain emotions, such as loneliness, differences across relationship status categories were more pronounced. For instance, being involuntarily single or in a good intimate relationship can make a big difference on the feeling of loneliness.

What about causality?

A common limitation among the studies summarized above is that they are cross-sectional, which prevents establishing causality. From an evolutionary perspective, relationship status is predicted to affect emotional wellbeing and life satisfaction. If this holds true, a strong association should exist between relationship status and these dimensions, which what we have observed (Apostolou et al., 2024). Nevertheless, other potential factors responsible for the observed association exist. More specifically, for various reasons, including genetic predispositions, people differ in their emotional wellbeing regardless of relationship status (Knopik et al., 2016). This inherent variation may lead to differences in relationship status. For instance, individuals experiencing depression might lack the motivation to seek partners or may be rejected as partners due to their depressive symptoms. Consequently, a depressive mood might lead to singlehood. Thus, while studies find an association between being single and feeling sad, the association could arise because singlehood causes sadness, sadness causes singlehood, or both. The most reasonable interpretation is the latter: The results of cross-sectional studies reflect both effects.

Nonetheless, since these studies cannot separate these two effects, it could be argued that the observed associations result solely from emotional wellbeing affecting relationship status, not vice versa. Evidence suggests this is not the case. In particular, one longitudinal study examined participants in a Finnish cohort followed at ages 22, 32, 42, and 52, measuring their depression levels (Grund-

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ström et al., 2021). Five categories of relationship status were considered: Marriage, cohabitation, dating, single, and divorced/widowed. The researchers found that, compared to being married, being single or divorced/widowed was consistently associated with poorer mental wellbeing over the life course, especially among men. These findings support the argument that relationship status can cause negative emotions—that is, individuals become less depressed when entering an intimate relationship and more depressed when exiting one.

Quality of life

The literature discussed above strongly suggests that single people may have a disadvantage in terms of emotional well-being and life satisfaction compared to those in moderate or high-quality intimate relationships. Nonetheless, it has been argued that single individuals might have an advantage in other aspects of life that are not fully captured by these dimensions, such as self-development (DePaulo, 2007), health (Nomaguchi & Bianchi, 2004; Park & MacDonald, 2022), and relationships with friends (Adams, 1976; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2016) and family (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2016). The main premise of these arguments is that considerable resources, such as time and money, are needed to attract and maintain an intimate partner; therefore, opting out of the "mating game" allows individuals to redirect these resources into other pursuits, such as personal development, improving health, or building a robust network of friends and family. Additionally, single people, being less committed, may have more freedom to pursue their desired activities. Since self-development, good health, and social relationships are beneficial, it could be argued that singlehood is superior to mated life in these respects.

This line of argumentation, while superficially reasonable, is conceptually flawed and is not supported by empirical evidence. The main flaw in the argument is ignoring human nature: As a sexually reproducing species, humans have a fundamental need for romantic intimacy, which drives them to invest considerable effort in forming and maintaining intimate relationships. Redirecting this effort elsewhere would leave this need unmet, likely resulting in a worse-off state. It is analogous to claiming that since obtaining food requires time and money, people could instead invest those resources in building a strong social network if they did not eat—ignoring that eating is an essential human need.

Furthermore, it is doubtful whether single individuals have more resources to allocate toward improving their quality of life than mated individuals. While forming and sustaining an intimate relationship do require monetary resources for services like beauticians or purchasing gifts for a partner, intimate relationships can also yield financial benefits through shared expenses. For instance,

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the substantial costs associated with renting a house and paying bills can be considerably reduced when living with a partner and sharing these expenses. It is also true that maintaining an intimate relationship requires a substantial time investment, such as spending time with partners. Still, having a partner can free up time by dividing responsibilities. For example, maintaining a household involves tasks like cleaning, shopping, and maintenance work that single individuals manage alone, but partners can share, saving considerable time.

Moreover, while single individuals may be less committed than those in relationships, allowing greater freedom to act without accountability to a partner, this does not necessarily translate into more opportunities for self-development, health improvement, or social networking compared to those in intimate relationships. For this to be the case, intimate relationships would need to constrain these pursuits, which is generally unlikely. While some instances of overly jealous partners may restrict social interactions (Buss, 2021), intimate partners often encourage and support each other's self-development efforts.

In terms of health, having someone who cares about one's well-being is more likely to promote health rather than impair it. Indeed, substantial literature indicates that married individuals often enjoy better health than unmarried ones (e.g., Sommerlad et al., 2017; Wong et al., 2018). Yet, this literature does not distinguished between single individuals and those who were in a relationship but not married, so their findings are not informative on the differences between single and mated people. Regarding social relationships, while mated individuals might spend less time with friends, potentially weakening their social network, their network could also expand by incorporating their partner's friends. Concerning relationships with relatives, although some conflicts between partners and their relatives can strain family relationships, there's often an enhancement of familial bonds when partners get along well with each other's relatives.

Empirical evidence

While the argument that single people might be better off than mated people in areas such as self-development, health, and relationships with friends and relatives is conceptually weak, it requires empirical testing for a more comprehensive understanding. In a study involving Greek-speaking participants, we explored the perceived benefits of being single and found that respondents ranked "Having more time for myself," "Focusing on my goals," and "Not being constrained by others' dictates" as notable advantages (Apostolou & Christoforou, 2022). This suggests that many individuals perceive singlehood as offering greater freedom to pursue personal desires.

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In terms of physical activity and health, Nomaguchi and Bianchi (2004) analyzed panel data from 13,496 American men and women, concluding that unmarried individuals engaged in more physical exercise than their married counterparts. Nevertheless, a limitation of this study, as seen in similar research, is the failure to distinguish between singles and those in non-marital committed relationships, labeling all as "unmarried." Park and MacDonald (2022) examined life priorities among singles in the United States and Korea, finding that maintaining health was a high priority, although their analysis did not include individuals in committed relationships as a comparison group. Therefore, it remains unclear whether those in committed relationships prioritize health similarly or even more than single individuals. Generally, studies show that married people tend to experience better health outcomes compared to other relational status groups (Olds & Schwartz, 2010). For instance, a meta-analysis of 34 studies involving over two million people indicated that marriage was linked to a lower risk of cardiovascular diseases (Wong et al., 2018). Another meta-analysis of 15 studies with over 800,000 participants showed that marriage was associated with a lower risk of dementia compared to being widowed or single for life (Sommerlad et al., 2017).

Regarding social connections, Gillespie et al. (2015) analyzed data from 25,185 participants in the USA and found that unmarried individuals typically had fewer friends than married ones, although the difference was very small. Sarkisian and Gerstel (2016) used U.S. panel data to reveal that unmarried persons more frequently maintained contact with, and offered and received help from, parents, siblings, neighbors, and friends compared to married persons. Still, neither study distinguished between single individuals and those who were in a relationship but not married. Conversely, Kalmijn (2003) used a representative dataset from the Netherlands to differentiate between dating and non-dating unmarried people. His research suggested that friendships and social contacts decrease when individuals begin dating or cohabiting and increase following a breakup. Moreover, some studies suggest unmarried individuals exchange more parental support than married ones (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2004; Suitor & Pillemer, 2006), while others find no substantial link between marital status and support or contact (Campbell & Martin-Matthews, 2003; Sechrist et al., 2007).

I designed a study to investigate specifically whether singles differ from those in relationships in their satisfaction with various aspects of life (Apostolou, Tekeş et al., 2024). In particular, we surveyed 1,929 individuals from Greece and Turkey regarding their satisfaction with dimensions such as health and friendships. The analysis showed no significant differences between singles and coupled individuals concerning physical health, relationships with family and friends, personal growth, independence, leisure, and social participation. Conversely, coupled participants reported greater satisfaction than singles in domains like

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material goods, disposable income, social support, sexual life, and parenting. These results were consistent across both cultural contexts. Overall, the assertion that singles surpass those in relationships regarding self-development, health, and social relationships lacks support from the current literature.

Further considerations and directions for future research

In the present chapter, I have examined the impact of singlehood on emotional wellbeing and life satisfaction. I have summarized empirical evidence that indicates consistent differences between single and partnered individuals. For instance, on average, single people tend to experience more loneliness than those in relationships. These findings require further explanation; specifically, why single people feel lonelier than partnered individuals, rather than the reverse. I have employed an evolutionary perspective to better understand this observed difference: When people lack an intimate partner, their reproductive and survival success is potentially compromised, triggering feelings of loneliness that motivate corrective actions, such as seeking an intimate partner. However, other theoretical frameworks, including attachment theory, developmental task theory, and social exchange theory, could also help explain these differences. Future theoretical work is needed to develop a more comprehensive framework for understanding singlehood.

From an evolutionary perspective, emotional mechanisms motivate behaviors that increase fitness. Fitness is considerably enhanced in lasting, functional intimate relationships because they create a context for having and raising children to sexual maturity. While individuals can procreate without being in a romantic relationship (through casual sexual encounters, for example), human children require considerable, reliable, and prolonged parental investment to reach sexual maturity. This investment is difficult for a single parent to provide, making procreation within a lasting intimate relationship more conducive to increasing fitness than procreation outside such relationships (Lancaster & Lancaster, 1987). This explains the observed differences in emotional wellbeing and life satisfaction mentioned above. In other words, forming a lasting intimate relationship improves the likelihood of having offspring that survive to sexual maturity. This was particularly true in preindustrial contexts, where social welfare institutions were absent, which characterized most of human evolutionary history.

The evolutionary framework predicts, however, that in specific circumstances, avoiding committed relationships in favor of casual ones could be more advantageous for fitness. For instance, men can potentially increase their reproductive success through casual sexual encounters with multiple partners. Men

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who possess desirable traits for short-term mating, such as physical attractiveness, might benefit more from a casual mating strategy than from committed relationships (see Buss, 2016). Consequently, these men might experience greater emotional wellbeing and life satisfaction while single than in romantic relationships. Future research should investigate the factors that are likely to enhance emotional wellbeing and life satisfaction in single individuals.

General conclusions

There have been several arguments in favor of (e.g., DePaulo, 2007) and against singlehood (e.g., Olds & Schwartz, 2010). These arguments often lack a solid theoretical and empirical basis. However, recent developments in this area provide the necessary framework to address the question of whether single people are better or worse off than mated people in terms of emotional wellbeing and life satisfaction. Based on existing theoretical arguments and empirical evidence, we can conclude that mated individuals have a small advantage over singles, with the differences becoming more pronounced when considering the type of singlehood and relationship quality. Specifically, individuals in good relationships enjoy the highest emotional wellbeing and life satisfaction, whereas those in bad relationships, closely followed by involuntarily singles, experience the lowest. Voluntarily single and between-relationships singles perform better than those in bad relationships and involuntarily singles, but worse than those in relationships of moderate or high quality. In terms of other outcomes related to quality of life, including self-development and relationships with friends and family, relationship status does not appear to be a significant factor. Concerning health, evidence indicates that long-term relationships such as marriage is positively associated with wellbeing. Furthermore, regarding sexual satisfaction and parenting satisfaction, mated people have a clear advantage over single people.

These findings have implications for the debate on whether mated or single life is associated with better life outcomes; theory and evidence suggest that mated life is superior if the relationship is of at least moderate quality. If individuals are in a poor-quality relationship, they may be better off single, with further improvement possible from ending the relationship and finding a higher-quality one. Importantly, these conclusions are based on statistical averages and may not apply to individual cases. There may be individual cases where people are better off spending their entire lives single rather than in an intimate relationship, or better off in a bad relationship than single. Yet, these are exceptions that do not hold true for most people.

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Chapter Two. Always Single Filipino Women: Stories of Well-being at Midlife

Abstract
Modern Philippine society has a collectivist culture that values women's roles as leaders. This is evidenced by the country's high literacy rate, particularly among women, and surpassing most countries globally in having women occupy top management positions. Despite this, Filipinos continue to hold women's roles as wives and mothers with the highest regard. Women who do not perform these valued roles risk being systematically marginalized and discriminated against, which may have implications for their well-being. This chapter presents the results of an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis exploring how well-being was defined and experienced by seven Filipino women aged 41 to 58 in the context of being middle-aged, childfree, and always single in modern-day Philippine society. This group of women experienced well-being as a) caring for the self, b) embracing one's reality, c) being supported, and d) experiencing a good life. The paper proposes a model of well-being specific to the realities experienced by single middle-aged Filipino women. These results can guide future research directions on the topic, and be used to inform practical recommendations that are supportive and facilitative of the well-being of middle-aged single women.
Keywords: Middle adulthood development; singlehood; Filipino women; well-being; qualitative psychology

Introduction

There has been a marked increase in the single population globally in recent decades. This has led to a variety of single people—such as, but not limited to, those who have never married, those who are divorced, separated, or widowed—who are also assumed to have distinct features and experiences. In past studies of single people, they are typically lumped together in one "single" category and then compared to their married counterparts. However, with the acknowledgment of the diversity of singlehood experiences, researchers are becoming more cognizant of the adverse consequences of studying them collectively and comparing them to their partnered counterparts. For example, it could lead to drawing inaccurate or misleading conclusions and failing to capture the nuances

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in the experiences of the variety of single people (Girme, Park & MacDonald, 2023). Thus, the call to conduct within-group inquiries on single people.

One of the common inaccurate conclusions made about singles is that they are believed to be less happy than their married peers. Many studies have already refuted this claim, as most singles reported being fairly or very satisfied with their lives (Walsh, Gonzales, Shen, Rodriguez & Kaufman, 2022). Moreover, involuntary singles were found to be even happier than coupled individuals who had poor relationship quality (Apostolou et al., 2024). These misconceptions about singles could lead to them being negatively perceived by society. This could, in turn, result in singlism, or the systematic disenfranchisement and discrimination on account of their failure to be partnered and have children (DePaulo & Morris, 2005). These can have negative social, economic, and psychological consequences, which could impact their well-being.

Moreover, there is value in looking at how the intersection of being a woman, being middle-aged, and being single could influence how they experience well-being as opposed to exploring these social factors individually (Crenshaw, 1989). I argue that while being single, being a woman, and being middle-aged have their unique sets of developmental gains, losses, and challenges, considering the intersectionality of possessing all three characteristics could produce more nuanced insights that can enlighten us on the specific ways that this intersectionality can facilitate or hinder their experience of well-being.

For example, previous studies have investigated age and gender differences in the experience of singlehood. The social acceptability of singlehood for women appears to be time-bound. It is acceptable, even encouraged in some cultures, for young women to have a single phase to explore and gain independence (Lahad, 2017). However, the moment she goes beyond this period and is still unpartnered, she risks disadvantageous social and psychological consequences such as being perceived negatively and more critically (Hertel, Schutz, DePaulo, Morris & Stucke, 2007). While men could also potentially experience the pressure to marry and start a family, the societal perception of men's ideal time for marriage is much older and more varied compared to women's (Allenford, Thornton, Mitchell, Young-DeMarco & Ghimire, 2018). This difference in perceived ideal marital timing could, in turn, influence differences in the experiences and well-being of men and women.

Among heterosexual singles, men fared better than women in terms of societal perception, as evidenced in the terms used to refer to them—bachelor versus spinster. The former connotes being available and desirable, while the latter suggests being past their prime and undesirable (Hoan & MacDonald, 2024). Partly due to this, single women would report feeling more pressured, stigmatized, and internally conflicted about being single compared to their male counterparts, who experienced less scrutiny, stigma, and tension about being

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single (Mandujano-Salazar, 2019). Moreover, single men were less likely to be perceived negatively for being single, felt less pressure to be partnered, and experienced less fear of being single (Sprecher & Felmlee, 2021).

Interestingly, despite this negative societal perception of women, several studies are showing that women, compared to men, are doing well and even thriving in their singlehood (Hoan & MacDonald, 2024). Single women were also observed to be more satisfied with singlehood than single men (Ochnik & Slonim, 2020). Furthermore, middle age was found to be an important turning point where satisfaction with singlehood was seen to increase from this life stage and beyond (Park, Page-Gould & MacDonald, 2022). These inconsistent findings likely imply that while the external societal perception of single men puts them in a more positive light compared to single women, women may have different psychosocial experiences that enable them to experience better well-being as singles than men.

If one is nested in a socio-cultural environment that perceives older single women as inferior, they could potentially internalize such deficit identity and stereotypes and may even be complicit in these (Pickens & Braun, 2018), potentially endangering their psychological well-being. On the other hand, it is also possible that different aspects of the same social context could provide them with varied resources and opportunities that allow them to thrive, regardless of how they are perceived by society.

The Philippine context and well-being

The Philippines is a predominantly Catholic (79%) and collectivist developing country (PSA, 2023) that promotes marriage as the context for starting a family, which is valued as the basic unit and the core of Philippine society. Marriage and family are not only put on a pedestal but also considered the gold standard for a Filipina's successful passage into adulthood. Failure to achieve this status at the prescribed time highlights her failure to meet her "highest feminine achievement" (Dionisio, 1994, p.8). This could lead to intrusive and unnecessary inquiries and demands for explanations for her singlehood (Reyes-Laureano, 2012; Abalos, 2021). While these findings were from Filipino samples, I would speculate that single women from other neighboring Asian countries would experience something similar, particularly due to the strong emphasis on family formation in religions common in Asia, like Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism.

In addition to these social consequences, single women are also prone to finding themselves in poverty in old age (EIGE, 2021). This is particularly likely in low-middle-income countries like the Philippines, where systemic financial safety nets have yet to be established or implemented well. As a collectivist

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culture, Filipinos also promote interdependence, value personal relationships, and prioritize the welfare of the family even at the expense of personal sacrifice (Alampay, 2024). One of its core values is *kapwa*, or the shared sense of self with others, particularly those considered as one's in-group, like one's family (Enriquez, 1994). This could explain why it is typical for older people to rely on their children for support.

Given this context, Philippine society could perceive single, middle-aged women as incomplete and socially inferior compared to their married counterparts. Having no partners and no children, they could also be further disadvantaged for lacking this critical source of support, potentially putting their well-being at risk.

At a certain point in the history of psychology, scholars began redefining mental health from the usual absence of illness to the presence of wellness. This paved the way for the development of positive psychology, where the main topic is well-being. Initially, people's experience and perception of their quality of life were measured in terms of subjective well-being, characterized by happiness, life satisfaction, and positive affect (Diener, 1984). Eventually, scholars found this hedonic focus limiting and transient. Psychological well-being was then proposed to include not only happiness but also realizing one's purpose and potential as central to the construct (Ryff, 2014). This approach was deemed more aligned with Aristotle's eudaimonia, or the good life that is achieved by living rationally and developing one's virtues (Ryff, 2014).

Positive psychology promotes flourishing in one's life and the planet by increasing one's experience of the five elements Seligman (2011) believed to contribute to well-being. These are positive emotion, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and achievement. Relatedly, some of these overlap with the six factors Ryff and Keyes (1995) proposed to make up psychological well-being. These are purpose in life, autonomy, personal growth, environmental mastery, positive relationships, and self-acceptance.

In this study, well-being is conceptualized as the "state of being well, happy or prosperous" (p.87) with an additional element of having a "personal drive to exist" (Healey-Ogden & Austin, 2011, p.87). It reflects a person's overall life quality, which includes their physical, psychological, and social functioning.

Kaginhawaan is a Tagalog word that closely translates to well-being in the main Filipino language. It is defined as the "ease or feelings of lightness one is experiencing when everything aspired for is in order or easily attainable" (SyCip, Asis & Luna, 2000, p.2). Related words are *kasaganahan* (prosperity) and *magandang buhay* (good life), which seem to initially imply economic wellness. When Filipinos were asked to define *magandang buhay*, twelve domains of well-being were identified namely, housing and quality of neighborhood, employment and quality of work life, personal savings and wealth, household income

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and savings, social relationships, leisure and spare time activities, physical health, psychological well-being, religion and spiritual life, information and knowledge, political participation, and peace, order and performance of government (SyCip et al., 2000). Based on this, *magandang buhay* appears to go beyond satisfying basic economic needs. Thus, the conceptualization of well-being as a state of wellness, joy, prosperity, and purposefulness (Healey-Ogden & Austin, 2011) aligns well with the Filipino *kaginhawaan* that holistically captures the psychological, social, and economic aspects of well-being.

A Filipino clinical psychological perspective on well-being considers *kaginhawaan* as a state of being in *mabuting kalagayan* (good condition), characterized by having *gana* (vigor or zest for life), *gaan* (ease and order), *sarap* (pleasure), and *ligaya* (happiness) (Bautista, 2019). When there is *kaginhawaan,* life has a sense of wholeness, order, fulfillment, and joy which is driven by a life force that aims to sustain it.

To better comprehend how this concept is utilized in Filipino culture, Paz (2008) explored how the different Filipino ethnolinguistic groups throughout the 7,641 islands in the Philippine archipelago referred to well-being. She discovered that though these groups have slightly varied ways of perceiving well-being, it seems to be associated with the word *ginhawa,* or to breathe, which is often associated with life itself (Paz, 2008). In some groups, well-being is being *maginhawa* or feeling light and easy, comfortable and content because one is relieved from worrying about problems and relying on others for the satisfaction of their needs. Some groups did not have exact words for well-being but described it in terms of aspirations like owning land and obtaining an education, or in terms of material possessions like having a big house and eating meals with rice thrice a day. Some groups also thought of well-being as specific social interactions where the entire community engages in collective work for the benefit of some community members. An example is marriage, where the different community members contribute food and volunteer services to ensure that the marriage feast is a success. These *bayanihan* (cooperative work) efforts involve voluntary and reciprocal collective work that safeguards the well-being of all community members. Finally, the spirit world and the natural world are also implicated by some groups in terms of guaranteeing their well-being. This is done by not upsetting the spirits or by taking cues and guidance from one's environment, like the cooing of the doves or the phases of the moon, to ensure the success of their endeavors.

A grounded theory exploration of the Filipinos' *kaginhawaan* revealed family to be a core category and an essential context in one's experience of well-being (Samaco-Zamora & Fernandez, 2016). In this model, well-being means having a job that enables one to have good economic standing and financial security, not just for oneself but also, and most especially, for one's family. When one is debt-

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free and able to financially provide for the family's needs and luxuries, psycho-emotional well-being is experienced and manifested as happiness, contentment, and having no worries. However, when Filipinos are unable to attain financial and emotional well-being, they maintain their *kaginhawaan* by turning to their spirituality for comfort, and peace of mind. All these are sought out and achieved in the context of one's family, which emphasizes the central role the family plays in Filipino culture. Thus, the Filipinos' well-being appears to be experienced through *kaginhawaan* not just of the self, but also of one's family, and could even extend to one's community—the ones Filipinos consider as their *kapwa.*

The current investigation

Qualitative and quantitative investigations on well-being among singles using varied outcomes like life satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, relationship status satisfaction, and motivations for coupling have yielded mixed results. While it seems that single women are unfavorably viewed by society and sometimes socially punished for being single, they also seem to be happier and more satisfied with life and their singlehood than men are. The interesting and mixed findings fueled my curiosity as a singlehood researcher and as a single and childfree Filipino woman in my thirties.

Given these, I wanted to know how well-being is defined and experienced by heterosexual, childfree, always single, middle-aged Filipino women. This means that they have no children and had neither married nor cohabited but may have had prior dating and relationship experiences. It was a deliberate choice to include only this specific and homogeneous subset of single women as an acknowledgement of the diversity of single people's experiences. Having a more heterogeneous group of singles may jeopardize the richness of the data. It also risks failing to capture their unique experiences, which are central to understanding how the Philippine context, where wifehood and motherhood are not only socially lauded but also believed to be economically and pragmatically beneficial, shapes their experience of well-being.

This study also adopts a single-centered perspective that assumes a strength-based approach to single people as opposed to the deficit narrative imposed on them (DePaulo, 2023). The results of this qualitative inquiry could contribute a Southeast Asian and qualitative perspective on the growing field of singlehood studies that are still mostly from WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic) societies, and from aggregate quantitative data (Adamczyk, 2023).

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Methodology

The research design and procedure

I utilized the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2022) as the qualitative design to answer the research question. To collect data, first, I obtained ethics clearance from my university. Through availability sampling, I recruited seven women who had never married, were not in a relationship at the time of data collection, and had not been in one for the past six months, did not have biological or adoptive children, and lived in any city in the Philippines. I collected data from August to December 2022. Using a semi-structured interview guide, I interviewed them via audio or video calls to avoid unnecessary travel and in-person interactions as the COVID-19 virus continued to be a looming threat in the country at that time. I called them to discuss the research details and to give them space to ask questions. When they were ready, they sent me signed electronic copies of the informed consent form through email or chat, then we scheduled the interviews. During the interviews, I first asked them about their typical day, hobbies, jobs, and families to establish rapport. I then inquired about their perception of well-being, and then asked them to give specific examples of how they experienced this in their daily lives.

To analyze the data using IPA, exploratory noting on the interview transcripts and identifying experiential statements were done first. Based on these, personal experiential themes (PETs) were obtained, and a write-up containing a short description of the participant, the PETs table, the definition of each theme, and its subthemes with quotes lifted from the interview that best captured the themes was prepared for each participant. This individualized write-up was shared with each participant via email or chat for their feedback on whether or not what I wrote about them resonated with them and accurately depicted their story. All of them approved of the way their stories were written. This process was done one participant at a time in keeping with IPA's idiographic feature. After this, I looked at all the PETs tables and searched for patterns of convergence and divergence, which were identified through the group experiential themes (GETs) across the cases. Quality was attained by adhering to the quality indicators for IPA identified by Nizza, Farr & Smith (2021) and maintaining my reflexivity practice through all the stages of the research.

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Participants

The participants were seven women aged 41 to 58. Luna is 41 years old and quit her office job a decade ago to care for her aging parents, manage their household, and work part-time in their family business. Selene is a 44-year-old lawyer who took over her father's law practice in her early twenties and continues to grow her practice. Jaya is a 49-year-old teacher and administrative assistant for a religious organization, lives with her mother, and takes care of five dogs and a pig. Phoebe is a 49-year-old house helper for a family for 25 years. Theia is a 53-year-old artist and teacher who lives in her own house and takes turns with her siblings in caring for their elderly mother. Cora is a 57-year-old itinerant vendor who goes around her neighborhood's local market and school to sell trinkets. Flora is a 58-year-old early childhood educator and the eldest of four siblings. None of the women initially planned on being single. They all had prior dating experiences except Jaya and Flora. At present, however, only Flora remains fully open to the possibility of marriage, while the rest wish to stay single. Though Theia and Selene did express some degree of openness, they still asserted their choice to be single.

Results

The group experiential themes presented here capture the points of convergence and divergence across the participants' experiences of well-being. To them, well-being meant caring for themselves, embracing their realities, being supported, and living the good life.

Well-being involves caring for the self

Theia's statement, "well-being is how you take care of yourself," captures the essence of the first theme regarding how the participants experienced well-being. They took care of themselves by ensuring the satisfaction of their basic needs and by protecting themselves from external threats to their well-being.

Satisfying one's basic needs

Ensuring their basic needs are satisfied contributes to the women's experience of well-being. For Flora, this means "you have a house so you don't have to worry that you won't have anywhere to live. And then you have food to eat three times a day" and having sufficient resources to meet these needs and pay one's bills. A typical Filipino meal consists of rice and a main dish that is taken for breakfast,

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lunch, and dinner. In times of economic hardship, other root crops like sweet potato or cassava are used as cheaper rice substitutes to cut costs. This emphasis on provisions supports prior reports on having material possessions and being able to eat well as part of the Filipinos' construal of well-being (Paz, 2008).

Sexual intimacy was found to be vital in aging and well-being (Luke & Poulin, 2023). However, sexual satisfaction as a need was brought up by only one participant. Jaya recognized this to be one aspect of her singlehood that may be challenging to satisfy. She dealt with this by engaging in physical activities and hobbies as an avenue for sexual release, saying, "it does not have to be physically sexually active to have that physical fulfillment, you can engage in sports or hobbies." Being in a predominantly Catholic society where sex is expected to be had within the context of marriage, casually talking about it, particularly among singles, could be considered taboo, and a possible reason it was not brought up often in the interviews. It is also possible that sex may not be that important and central to the other participants' well-being. Luke and Poulin (2023) found that single middle-aged women varied greatly in terms of the value they place on sexual satisfaction, with some seeing it as less important than companionship and other non-sexual forms of intimacy like touching and cuddling, and others not caring about sex at all.

To some, well-being also means being alive, healthy, able-bodied, and free of illness. For Cora, it means "my body is well, I don't feel any illnesses… I don't feel aches in my knees or my feet." For Jaya, it means having energy and feeling youthful. To sustain this level of wellness, they also kept healthy habits like exercising, eating and sleeping well, and keeping themselves fit. Relatedly, Theia reported wanting to maintain her wellness to avoid getting sick, which she perceives as a possible burden for others, saying, "it's one significant reason why you have to take care of yourself, especially if you're single, right? I don't want to be a burden if I get sick."

Despite the Universal Healthcare Act (RA 11223) mandating universal healthcare for all Filipinos being signed into law in 2019, its full implementation has yet to materialize, and the elderly, women, rural, and poor Filipinos suffer the brunt of this predicament (Lagman, 2023). Healthcare remains expensive and inaccessible to many, leading them to believe they cannot afford hospitalization, while those who got hospitalized reported using up their savings or taking a loan from relatives to pay their medical bills (Chanco, 2019). Thus, for many Filipinos, illness is not just a physical health concern but also a financial one. Furthermore, in the Philippines, caregiving duties for the sick and elderly primarily fall on spouses and daughters, and to a lesser extent, on grandchildren (Abalos, Saito, Cruz & Booth, 2018), which the participants have neither. Given this context, being physically healthy and free from illnesses then makes sense as a relevant characteristic of well-being for my participants because they fear

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encumbering the people around them with financial and caregiving burdens should they get sick.

Flora added that having "the resources and time to do things you need to do or want to do" contributes to well-being after acknowledging the difficulty of sustaining one's resources as one gets older. The salience of being financially secure to experience well-being adds up in a socio-economic context where about 15.5% of the population lives below the poverty line, indicating some degree of economic hardship (Reuters, 2024). It also supports two of the models of Filipino well-being, which identify good economic conditions (Samaco-Zamora & Fernandez, 2016) and having personal wealth and household savings (SyCip et al., 2000) as well-being elements. In sum, essential to these women's experience of well-being is having their basic needs satisfied and having the financial means to do so.

Protecting the self from threats

To these women, caring for themselves also means protecting themselves from stereotypes, setting boundaries, and believing in themselves despite their challenges. Most of them recognize that people hold negative stereotypes about singles, which leads people to respond negatively towards them. For example, Theia narrates an encounter with her friend's husband where "his facial expression was a dead giveaway when he found out I was single—he seemed disgusted by it and like he pitied me." The treatment made her feel pathetic, and she dealt with it by asserting that she is not any of these. This demonstrates the tenacity of the couple norm, where everyday interactions with people around singles may unwittingly marginalize singles and pressure them to partner up (Roseneil, Crowhurst, Hellesund, Santos & Stoilova, 2020). Having to assert herself and defend her status that she is not pitiful is further proof of the ubiquity of singlism (DePaulo & Morris, 2005).

The women also highlighted the importance of setting boundaries between their work and personal lives to ensure they still have time and resources for themselves. For Selene, this means setting a time to stop working, "whether I'm finished (with work) or not, I have to stop. I have to put an end, otherwise the work will never end." This gives her time to do other things to take care of herself besides work. Relatedly, for Jaya, taking breaks is essential not only to relax but also to make space for her creative pursuits. This finding supports two of the existing Filipino models of well-being, postulating employment and quality work life to be significant domains of well-being (SyCip et al., 2000; Samaco-Zamora & Fernandez, 2016) and seems protective for the women given the broader context of economic insecurity and volatility. However, this finding also hints at striking a delicate balance between securing their finances and, at the same time, not

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letting that be the center of their lives. They need to ensure they still have time for leisure, self-care, and other worthwhile pursuits (SyCip et al., 2000).

Finally, despite acknowledging the difficulties in their lives, believing in themselves seemed essential to overcoming these challenges and facilitating their well-being. Luna shared, "I've experienced problems before which I've also solved, and that's how I know I will get through." This finding mirrors the result of an earlier study we did where single Filipinas in their thirties had to set "firm but healthy boundaries" to assert and advocate for themselves, which enabled their experience of meaningfulness in their lives (Mendez & Ong, 2022, p. 77).

These stories reveal that these women can satisfy their basic needs and secure the resources to do so. They are also able to protect themselves from the usual life challenges, the additional health concerns they need to deal with as they are getting older, and the different manifestations of singlism, which is a distinctive experience to them as single women. By investing in themselves, these women are setting themselves up for success in their single lives (DePaulo, 2023).

Well-being entails embracing one's reality

The women also reported acceptance of their realities, including different aspects of themselves and their unintended singlehood, as essential to their well-being.

Accepting oneself

The women mentioned acceptance of themselves—the bad, the good, and the inevitable. Many of them acknowledged and came to accept their limitations, their mistakes, and even the negative emotions they felt. For Selene, learning to accept her mistakes made it easier for her to learn from these, saying, "when I feel the sting of my mistakes and shortcomings, I remind myself of the lesson." For Jaya, it was important for her to accept not only the positive but also the negative emotions she felt, so she could continue to thrive and be well despite experiencing these. She shared,

> We're all just humans, we can't always be positive all the time, right? He (God) has planted me in this situation, so bloom there. If you're put in a hardship, do something about it. You cannot dwell in those negatives because your well-being will really be affected.

An interesting point raised by the participants was how part of accepting oneself is genuinely accepting one's goodness. Selene shared that she used to downplay her achievements and her positive impact on her community, but eventually learned to embrace her goodness as well. She shared, "I tend to put myself down,

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so for me to still be able to see the goodness in me despite the sting of my mistake, it's like a pat on the back and 'hey, you did it!'" As part of a collectivist culture, the Filipino's sense of self is construed to be relational and interdependent, as reflected in the concept of *kapwa.* This is one's sense of shared self with others, regardless of the other's classification as insider or outsider to one's own (Cleofas, 2016). This value often leads Filipinos to prefer fitting in harmoniously with the others around them rather than standing out. This could explain why many Filipinos may find it hard to acknowledge their goodness, accept compliments, and recognition. They may also struggle to forgive themselves when they make mistakes, especially if these mistakes are perceived to be hurting other people.

Finally, they also mentioned letting go of their youth and accepting that they are getting older and the challenges that go with it. Flora shared her experience of introducing herself to young children as Lola Flora now, instead of Auntie Flora. In the Philippines, there are generic terms to respectfully refer to women, and the specific terms used may connote how old they are. For example, the term *ate* (older sister) is used to refer to young women, *auntie/tita* (aunt) typically refers to middle-aged women, while *lola* (grandmother) is used to refer to elderly women. Flora introducing herself as "*lola*" implies an acceptance and an ownership of her getting older.

Alongside the acceptance of their inevitable aging is the recognition of the limitations that go with it. Jaya initially compared herself to her younger coworkers who are pursuing their graduate degrees. Later, she recognized her capacities and limits and decided that she was content with her master's degree, saying, "I don't want to pursue a doctorate anymore, I know my brain's limits, that's why." Flora also noticed and accepted that she could no longer clean the house as fast as she did before. This led her to work at her current pace with less pressure. For Selene, acknowledging her limits as a person allowed her to empower others and give them opportunities to step up and lead, ensuring the sustainability of her organization and pursuits.

These results coincide with findings from previous studies. Two of the salient themes associated with successful aging among the middle-aged in South Korea and Iran are accepting and coping with the changes in the participants' minds and bodies (Lee, Kim & Jo, 2023), and preparing for their later years by promoting their physical health and well-being (Solhi, Pirouzeh & Zanjari, 2022). Moreover, the finding that knowledge and acceptance of the self could contribute to their well-being also supports Ryff's (2014) idea that self-acceptance is one of the key dimensions of psychological well-being. Finally, like my participants' experience, letting go of unhealthy expectations, focusing on the present, and amplifying their satisfying experiences were key contributors to the well-being of middle-aged people considered exemplars of well-being (Healey-Ogden & Austin, 2011).

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Accepting one's circumstances

Embracing their circumstances and letting go of things they could not control also seemed essential to the women's well-being. This acceptance of the inevitable and the uncontrollable appears to promote their well-being by lessening the stress they experienced from resisting and trying to control these things. Luna acknowledges that there are uncontrollable aspects of life, but she accepts these simply because "that's how life is." Jaya maintains her well-being by acknowledging that stress and challenges are a part of life, saying, "I should not avoid stress because it's part of our lives. It's how you deal with stress." Relatedly, seeing the "silver lining" of negative events allows her "to hope for the best," saying, "if you look at yourself being a glass half-full, that makes a big impact rather than dwelling on the negative side of things. It gets tiring when you're always complaining about things."

Particularly for these women, one of the unexpected things they had to learn to accept was their singlehood. Jaya's acceptance of her singlehood allowed her to enjoy it and derive positive experiences from it, saying, "I have learned to love it, I'm living with it, and it's a nice feeling for me because I have accepted it. But I cannot say for others." She explained that not accepting her singlehood could make her feel bitter, saying,

> 'Lord, why am I single? Why doesn't anyone love me? What's wrong with me?' I don't want to go through that stage where you're always questioning God. Who are we to question Him (God), right? Might as well do our best, whatever, wherever God has planted, bloom.

She added that the joy she feels inside shines through and is noticed by others around her, "they can see it—my officemates, the kids I am teaching, my niblings—it just shows that I'm happy and I've accepted it… I'm becoming a model for being a happy spinster." She shares that her experience became an unintentional opportunity to break stereotypes and show people that happiness is possible for a single woman in her forties.

For Flora, who was the sole participant who claimed that singlehood was not her choice, looking at the brighter side of her unwanted singlehood enabled her to be at peace with it. Phoebe believed that her being single is partly responsible for her good health because "I don't experience a lot of stress, which is what causes sickness, right?" For Theia, acknowledging that despite being self-reliant and independent, she sometimes finds herself wanting a partner to share life with, facilitated her acceptance of her singlehood.

For all participants, singlehood at midlife was not something they had originally planned; rather, it was something they had to come to terms with and learn to accept. This hints at the tenacity of the couple norm's imposition of marriage and family life as the normative adult experience (Roseneil et al., 2020). Those

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who veer away from this path could be ascribed a lower status, thus necessitating becoming accustomed to and accepting it. The same pattern was observed among single young adult Filipinas who had to come to accept their unplanned singlehood by ascribing spiritual meanings to it, such as their singlehood being a part of God's plans for them (Mendez, 2022). Moreover, like their younger Filipina counterparts, these middle-aged Filipinas also came to terms with their unexpected singlehood by maximizing the benefits and opportunities of being single, such as having more freedom to do as they please and finding unique opportunities in their singlehood to care for themselves (Mendez & Ong, 2022).

Despite not initially choosing to be single, all the participants except Flora have now claimed that singlehood is their choice. Single women may tend to vacillate between positioning themselves as making an active choice or accepting the chance factors that they have little control over. This is likely in a social context that positions single women as having a deficit identity and provides them with limited interpretative repertoires to paint positive pictures of themselves (Reynolds, 2008). Hence, vacillating between positioning their life circumstances—their singlehood included—either as their choice or as a result of the inevitable that they have come to accept allows them to negotiate their narratives and create positive and strong identities more flexibly, depending on the context of their storytelling. Moreover, their resolve and assertion of the current voluntariness of their singlehood could be a form of resistance and a reclaiming of their sense of agency over their lives. Finally, their acceptance may have also been facilitative of their well-being as voluntary singles were found to report better well-being and lower romantic loneliness in past studies (DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Adamczyk, 2017).

Being supported facilitates well-being

The participants reported social and spiritual support as essential to their well-being.

Receiving support from loved ones

For many of them, the support of their families and friends had been pivotal in their experience of well-being as captured in Theia's statement, "the comfort and support of family. It's important that in all aspects, right, you have the family's support." She added that "in old age, you go back to family." For Jaya, her family's acceptance of her singlehood also made it possible for her to experience well-being, saying, "physically, emotionally, I'm okay, I'm content to have a support group from my friends, family. Being single, they have accepted it,

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nobody's pressuring me." Flora added that in the absence of her own family, the support of her siblings, especially in times of need, was facilitative of her well-being. She shared, "when we were both sick, we took care of each other. When I am out of money, my siblings pay for things. I owe them so much already." Selene also shared that her sleep quality felt better whenever her niblings stayed with her, saying, "I would consider it a gift."

For Jaya, her loved ones included her pets, whom she considers her "fur babies." Knowing that she is loved by her pets contributes to her experience of well-being, "I can see their unconditional love… So I'm also loved by the animals, not only by people." For Luna, the support from her friends came in the form of helping her see different perspectives. She said, "I learn a lot from my friends when they share their life experiences. We have a back-and-forth discussion on what and how to solve our problems." This sharing of problems with her friends also seems to be a source of validation that she is not the only one going through difficulties.

Cora's experience was slightly different in that, instead of just receiving support, what was more important for her well-being was for her to "make a lot of people happy." She added, "people say I am very friendly to the neighbors, I'm very helpful and enthusiastic when there are tasks to be done." Relatedly, Pheobe shared that whenever her family is not doing well, it negatively affects her well-being because she worries about them. For these two, they also found social support from giving instead of just receiving from others. Also vital to their well-being was having time to spend with their relevant others. Flora's statement, "to have time for others, yes, for my family and my friends because they are important to me," exemplifies this. Similarly, Luna shared, "when my family members are doing well, when we are together, I'm very happy when that happens."

This finding coincides with previous literature on unpartnered singles in the United States, where those with positive relationships not only with themselves but also with others are the happiest (Walsh et al., 2022). Unmarried American women also engaged in more social interactions with friends and found ways to satisfy their social needs beyond romantic relationships (Carr, 2007). Single American women over 40 also reported valuing their families and friends the most and defining family broadly to include their families of origin and their closest friends as they aged (McDill, Hall & Turell, 2006). Among single women in China and Singapore, seeking emotional and social support was one of the practical coping strategies they used to manage the challenges they faced as singles in such marriage-promoting societies (Ang, Lee & Lie, 2020). In the Philippines, where *kapwa,* or the shared sense of self, is considered one of its core values, caring for others, particularly people considered family, seems a natural, almost necessary, ingredient to taking care of oneself. Among single young adult

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Filipinas, singlehood is one of the spaces where they can find "opportunities to protect and nurture both the self and one's relations with others" (Mendez & Ong, 2022, p.88). For well-being to be experienced, aspired for, and achieved within the context of one's family and one's *kapwa* seems to be a unique feature of Filipino well-being (Samaco-Zamora & Fernandez, 2016).

Receiving support from one's faith

Having a relationship or connection with a spiritual being has been facilitative of the participants' well-being in that it allowed them to be more present and worry less. Phoebe said, "I just pray and God will take care of tomorrow, as long as today I'm okay, my body is well, I have a job, and I can give help to my family." Luna added, "I trust that whatever obstacles or problems that will be given to me, that I will solve these," which she believes is a big factor in her experience of well-being. Having a spiritual belief also enabled Selene to feel at ease with acknowledging the finiteness of her resources and control, saying, "not everything is within my control, even though I try so hard, even if I give it my all."

Cora's faith had also been a useful framework to help her make sense of and accept her singlehood, saying, "I think God intentionally ensured that I do not get sick because I don't have children, I don't have a husband… And I am happy with this because this is what God has given me." The same is true for Jaya, who said, "God's love is sufficient for me, so I'm okay with being single." She added that more than her civil status, it is her identity as a follower of Christ that is her source of security.

Turning to religion and spirituality, particularly in seeking comfort, assurance, and peace of mind in times of uncertainty, was identified as a key domain of Filipino wellness, (SyCip et al., 2000; Samaco-Zamora & Fernandez, 2016). Single Asians use religion and spirituality as alternative meaning frameworks to draw positive meanings and negotiate positive identities from, and as sources of spiritual coping strategies to satisfy their needs and develop a sense of agency over their lives as singles (Himawan, 2020; Mendez, 2022). The women experienced present well-being by relinquishing control over their future to God or a Higher Being, and by remaining agentic in their ability to influence their future outcomes through engaging in their present religious and spiritual practices. In addition, they made several allusions to God that were vital in their acceptance of the different aspects of themselves and their life circumstances, further supporting spirituality's contribution to their well-being.

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Experiencing a good life as a manifestation of well-being

When asked to share how they experienced well-being, the women described what seemed like their definition of a good life or *magandang buhay*. The good life they described is characterized by freedom, lightness, comfort, contentment, and gratitude.

Living in freedom

Being free to do the things they want and love seemed like an important component of the women's experience of well-being and a characteristic of a good life. For Selene, who used to deny feeling her unpleasant emotions, this means allowing herself to think and feel the way she does. She said, "more than being free to think and decide for myself, it's also about being free to feel my emotions." For Luna, this means being free to do the little things she loves, like her hobbies, "if I can do my hobbies, I'm already very happy when that happens."

Freedom is one of the frequently mentioned benefits of singlehood, and many never-married women over forty fear losing this freedom if they get married (McDill et al., 2006). Autonomy is one of the dimensions of psychological well-being (Ryff, 2014) that is experienced and enjoyed by the women in my sample, particularly the freedom to be themselves without being beholden to anyone. This supports prior claims that single people value having the autonomy to pursue an authentic life and to engage in pursuits and leisure activities that are personally meaningful to them (DePaulo, 2023). Moreover, this emphasis on their freedom may also be seen as a way for the participants to give themselves power and value to counter the deficit identities society imposed on their single members (Kohlemainen, Lahti & Kinnunen, 2022).

Living in ease and comfort

The women's experience of a light and easy life stemmed from having less stress and worries. Phoebe attributes her comfortable life to her predictable and manageable workload and her being single. She said, "being single, I get to live a comfortable life without a lot of worries to think about, just my family, myself, and my job." Cora echoed similar sentiments, saying, "I can sleep well, I don't have a lot of things to think about, things are just light." They believe such is the case for them because being single means being less stressed. Theia shared, "in terms of stress, maybe, compared to the wives or to married people, I think at least in my case, there's less stress." Thus, her current life as a single woman allows her to live in comfort, and she would only consider marriage if the same or a higher level of comfort goes with it.

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The women's experience of living in ease and comfort is what is meant by being *maginhawa* in prior inquiries on Filipino well-being (Paz, 2008; SyCip et al., 2000). Across the different ethnolinguistic groups in the Philippines, the common concept associated with Filipino well-being is *ginhawa,* which means "to breathe." One can breathe well when one lives in ease and comfort because one is free from stress and worries, one's basic needs are satisfied, one lives in harmony with the others around them, and one can rely on a Higher Power to look after them. When one can also shift their focus from seeking external validation to having a better alignment between their inner and outer selves, and when one permits oneself to be authentic, a sense of calm and peace can be the resulting experience (Healey-Ogden & Austin, 2011). The women also seem to be in a state of *mabuting kalagayan* (good condition) where they experienced a sense of *gaan* (relaxation), particularly from having the freedom to do things that give them *sarap* (pleasure) and *ligaya* (happiness) (Bautista, 2019).

Living with gratitude and contentment

Finally, the women believed that a good life is also characterized by feelings of contentment and gratitude in all aspects of one's life and well-being. For Theia, this contentment was brought about by a change in mindset—from defining the good life as one that included being married and having her own family, to defining it in terms of contentment with the current life she has. She said,

> My mindset now is, uh, I have to embrace whatever I have. That's it. Because others would compare themselves and see others as better off, but no, I say, you have to appreciate what you have.

For Jaya, once contentment is achieved, there is nothing that can hinder her well-being, saying, "as of now, I'm content, there's that contentment stage, so I'm not searching for something to fill the void in me." For Phoebe, her contentment is manifested in finding joy in small things, saying, "I am very easy to please, I easily become happy with the smallest things."

Contentment is construed as a positive emotion that is associated with self-acceptance that also increases well-being (Cordaro, Bai, Bradley, Zhu, Han, Kletner, Gatchpazian & Zhao, 2024). For the participants, contentment was attained through their improved knowledge and acceptance of themselves. This resulted from being and savoring the present, seeing things differently, letting go of beliefs that no longer hold, and aligning themselves with where they are in their lives (Healey-Ogden & Austin, 2011). The earlier theme of acceptance appears to be critical in well-being through facilitating their sense of contentment.

Gratitude also seems to characterize the women's idea of a good life. Cora feels grateful for how well her neighbors treat her, saying, "I am grateful that they treat

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me this way, and I am happy to treat them the same way too." She added that she starts and ends her day with prayers of gratitude, saying,

> When I wake up, I thank God that I'm still able to wake up… and when I'm about to sleep, I pray again, to thank God for giving me good health, especially because I am on my own.

Furthermore, Flora recognizes that it is a privilege to experience well-being and is grateful for it, saying,

> Of course, there's gratitude because not everyone gets to experience, not everyone wakes up without aches and illnesses, not everyone has resources, can pay their bills on time, or can do chores. Yes, I am grateful.

Gratitude is the "appreciation of what is valuable and meaningful to oneself" and is a "general state of thankfulness and/or appreciation" that is often associated with an overall sense of well-being (Sansone & Sansone, 2010, p.18). The current results support prior findings that gratitude generally increased with age, and its correlation with well-being was consistent across the lifespan (Chopik, Newton, Ryan, Kashdan & Jarden, 2020). It makes sense then for women to include feelings of gratitude in their lived experience of well-being.

Conclusions

Figure 1 evidences the proposed model of well-being summarizing the factors that contributed to the current sample of single middle-aged women's experience of well-being.

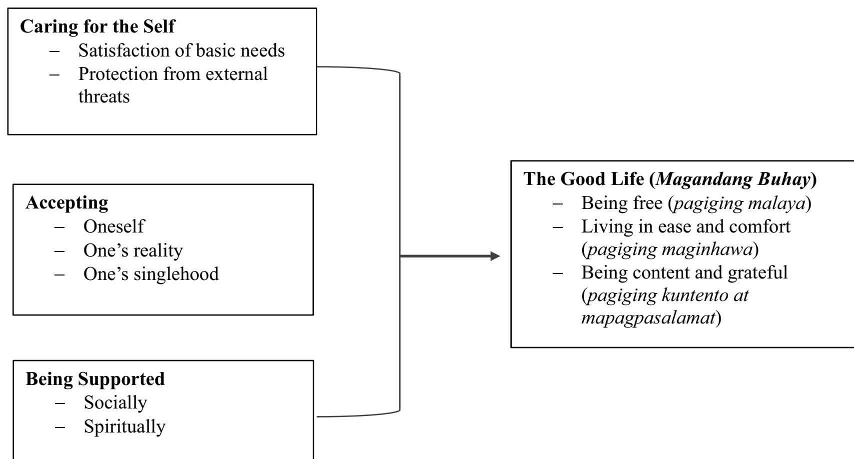

Figure 1. Proposed Model of Well-Being for Always Single Middle-Aged Filipino Women

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The women in the current study experienced well-being as the good life (*magandang buhay*) that is characterized by being free (*pagiging malaya*), living in ease and comfort (*pagiging maginhawa*), and being content (*pagiging kuntento*) and grateful (*pagiging mapagpasasalamat*). The paper revealed both internal and external factors that contributed to their well-being. It seemed that caring and advocating for themselves, and accepting themselves and their life circumstances were important internal drivers of their well-being. We also saw the pivotal contribution of receiving support from their social relationships and their spirituality to their well-being. Based on these findings, I propose this model identifying three potential factors that shaped and contributed to how always single middle-aged Filipino women experienced well-being as the good life.

This study contributes to singlehood and well-being research by providing nuanced insights into the specific factors that promote well-being from a non-WEIRD and unique sample of middle-aged Filipino women who have never married and do not have children. However, it is also important to acknowledge that these findings only apply to the specific sample and may not generalize to other genders and cultural groups. Additionally, while the characteristics of a good life identified from the women's stories allow us to see how well-being is manifested in their lives, the current study is not able to clarify whether these characteristics are predictors or outcomes of well-being. Future research could be expanded to include men and non-binary genders, those who are single because of separation, divorce, or the death of partners, and include the entire range of adulthood. Doing so could produce a more inclusive model and a holistic understanding of the factors that shape the single Filipinos' well-being.

The findings could be used by practitioners, particularly those working with middle-aged single women, to inform their treatment plans, interventions, and developmental programs in counseling single women or in helping them maximize their potential. The Filipino community could also utilize the findings to create a social environment that is more conducive to their well-being. For example, community support groups could be organized to provide a space for these women to meet, socialize, and plan community-building initiatives that can be beneficial not just for their communities but also for them. Unique features of the Filipino culture, such as having strong family ties, social relationships, religiosity, and spirituality, could be tapped, developed, or strengthened to help single women thrive and attain what they perceive as the good life.

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Chapter Three. A (Wo)man with a Plan? Understanding Life Course Plans among Single Young Adults

Abstract
This chapter presents a qualitative study examining the assumption that young adults intentionally plan their relationships as part of the *Developmental Tasks* framework and challenging the traditional view of singlehood as a temporary phase before settling down. Even though the number of single (young) adults is rising, singlehood is often seen as a temporary status after which individuals settle with a romantic partner. This chapter focuses on developmental tasks that explain periods of singlehood, as some tasks could be prioritized over others. Research among young adults found that being single allowed them to pursue individual goals and interests, and therefore, they deliberately delayed romantic involvement.
This chapter addresses the fundamental assumption behind this rhetoric: young adults plan their relationship status. The *Developmental Tasks* Argument implies a conscious and planned path that young adults foresee for their (future) relationship status. We therefore pose the research question, *"Do young adults plan their relationship status? If yes, how? If not, why not?"*. We conducted 44 qualitative, in-depth interviews with single individuals between 24 and 37 years old. Our analysis found young adults both with and without a relationship plan. Based on how they approach relationship planning, we identified five "ideal types": Life Course Planners, Developmental Task Accomplishers, Childfree Non-Seekers, Personal Development Prioritizers, and Confident Non-Seekers. Together, the ideal types illustrate that single young adults' relationship and life course trajectories represent a dynamic and complex interplay of personal choices, societal expectations, and external circumstances—and are not always a matter of deliberate planning. As such, they contribute to a better and more nuanced understanding of singlehood and relationship trajectories among young adults, particularly in how they navigate relationship aspirations alongside other life goals.
Keywords: Developmental tasks; young adults; relationship planning

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Introduction

Singlehood is often seen as a temporary status in the transition to adulthood (Tessler, 2023). For example, theories on romantic stage development among adolescents describe how adolescents move through various phases in their sexual and romantic experiences and eventually progress into stable and committed romantic relationships (Connolly et al., 2004; Connolly & Goldberg, 1999; Furman & Collins, 2009; Seiffge-Krenke, 2003). Despite this normative and linear life course perspective in which individuals settle with a romantic partner after adolescence, many experience episodes of singlehood in the life stage of (young) adulthood. Research has shown that singlehood is rising. In 2002, 32.0% of European adults were single—defined in this chapter as individuals who were neither married, nor in any other type of union, nor cohabiting with a spouse or partner; by 2018, this had increased to 35.3% (Adamczyk & Trepanowski, 2023; van den Berg & Verbakel, 2022).

Traditional life course theories conceptualize lives as a series of normative events, in which partnering and starting a family is one of these events. Early research on the transition to adulthood stated that important events – such as leaving the parental home, graduating from school, entry into the labor market, entry into marriage, and entry into parenthood – take place during this transition and are important markers of this transition (Elder Jr, 1975; Modell et al., 1976; Neugarten & Datan, 1973). Although this view on the transition to adulthood has been contested (Arnett, 2000), Liefbroer and Toulemon (2010) argued that traditional and *new* markers like unmarried cohabitation are still important events during the transition to adulthood that have an impact on the future of these adults. Furthermore, Billari and Liefbroer (2010) noticed that there has been a new European pattern of the transition to adulthood that is characterized as late, protracted and complex instead of early, contracted and simple. It is *late* because many events, such as the postponement of union formation, occur late during young adulthood. It is *protracted* in that the timespan between the first and last transition – usually home leaving and parenthood or marriage – is relatively long. *Complex* in the sense of various events occurring during young adulthood, some even repetitive.

The literature indicates that developmental tasks are linked to life stages, with specific developmental tasks—such as completing education, building a career, or forming intimate relationships—associated with young adulthood (Havighurst, 1948; Schulenberg et al., 2004). These tasks are not only age-normative expectations, but also play a crucial role in *personal development.* Successfully managing such tasks contributes to a sense of competence, identity, and psychosocial maturity, and supports young adults in navigating the complexities of contemporary life course transitions. More recent interpretations view de-

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velopmental tasks as not just socially prescribed, but also individually negotiated challenges that reflect both external expectations and personal aspirations (Hurrelmann & Quenzel, 2018; Shulman & Connolly, 2013).

Within this broader understanding, personal growth, autonomy, and identity exploration are also considered central developmental themes during young adulthood. In this context, scholars have used the concept of developmental tasks as an important explanation of singlehood because some tasks could be prioritized over others. For example, recent empirical research by Beckmeyer and Jamison (2023b) revealed that most young adults found that being single allowed them to pursue individual goals and interests. Another study found that young adults deliberately delayed romantic involvement to pursue career goals first (Hill, 2020).

This book chapter addresses the fundamental assumption behind this rhetoric, which is the idea that young adults plan their relationship status. Using the *Developmental Tasks* argument as a declaration for the rise in single young adults implies a conscious and planned decision by these young adults about their relationship status. Not everyone is, as Stein (1981) referred to it, "a voluntary single" person or, like Bear and Offer (2023) called it, "challenging singlehood". For this reason, we will investigate the research question, *"Do young adults plan their relationship status? If yes, how? If not, why not?"*.

This research question challenges the traditional assumption that single young adults experience the inherent need to establish a relationship towards the end of their adolescence. Hence, it opens up possibilities to theorize about alternative life course plannings that may help to construct explanations for the observed altering patterns of singleness during young adulthood. Prior studies have already delved into the reasons for singlehood, for instance, because individuals have other priorities (Apostolou, 2017; Apostolou et al., 2020). However, this research is limited to reasons for singlehood in general and not specifically for young adults, whereas previous research shows that young adults have many developmental tasks during this transitional period (Beckmeyer & Jamison, 2023c; Shulman & Connolly, 2013).

Shulman and Connolly (2013) even proposed a "transitional emerging adult romantic stage" in which young adults try coordinating life plans and romantic involvement. A significant gap remains in understanding how and why young adults plan their relationship status, prioritizing specific developmental tasks over romantic involvement (Beckmeyer & Jamison, 2023c). This will be addressed in this paper and will give better insights into young adults' life choices and experiences, especially since earlier studies have shown that there are more developmental tasks than in earlier cohorts and that the sequence of these developmental tasks is less fixed (Billari & Liefbroer, 2010).

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Literature

First, we examine research on reasons for singlehood. As many studies focus on deficits, we also explore positive reasons, which have received more attention in research in recent years. This leads to research on singlehood as a conscious choice. Finally, we delve into research on developmental tasks.

Reasons for singlehood

Research on singlehood gives several reasons why (young) adults are single and distinguishes different categories and typologies. We can identify two approaches in the literature. The first one is a deficit approach to singlehood. Research by Apostolou (2017) and Apostolou et al. (2020) suggested that a possible reason for (choosing) singlehood could be a *fitness-increasing strategy.* This means that single individuals decide not to seek a partner because people first want to improve several traits that a potential future partner highly values. These traits are, for instance, education, social status, wealth, and good earning capacity (Buss, 1989, 2016). Because improving these traits and having a romantic partner takes time, money and effort, single people may postpone romantic involvement and eventually look for a better partner. Other research explained singleness due to a lack of interest in romantic relationships (Beckmeyer & Jamison, 2023a, 2023c). This appears when individuals want to avoid relationships and are uninterested in them at that moment, for example, because they do not feel ready for a relationship yet.

Another explanation attributes singleness to what Beckmeyer and Jamison (2023a, 2023c) named *self-defeating reasons*, meaning individuals ascribe their singleness to personal shortcomings. For example, being single may result from what Apostolou (2017) and Apostolou et al. (2020) called a *mismatch problem.* This occurs when people face difficulties finding a partner because they have a low capacity to do so, which may result from factors such as poor flirting skills, considering themselves as undesirable partners, experiencing sexual difficulties, commitment anxiety, or having health or disability issues. According to the authors, single people are not always aware of this mismatch. Another example of self-defeating reasons for singlehood is constraints, which are traits that reduce individuals' ability to attract a mate (Apostolou, 2017). These constraints could be personal, such as addictions, being infertile, and moving frequently, or could be the result of previous relationships, for instance, not being over your last relationship, the fear of getting hurt, and being too picky (Apostolou et al., 2020). The authors stated that if single people perceive that they have such unattractive traits, they may choose to stay single.

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All these reasons emphasized deficits, such as individuals' unattractive traits, not having the right capabilities or a lack of interest in romantic relationships, which highlights the underlying assumption that everyone pursues a relationship and that individuals have complete control over how their relationship trajectories unfold, disregarding other factors that may also contribute to being single. Research often highlights the negative attributes of singlehood (Beckmeyer & Jamison, 2023c; DePaulo, 2023a), in line with DePaulo's (2013) finding that being coupled is still seen as more desirable than being single. However, there can also be positive reasons for singlehood, which is the second approach in the literature towards singlehood. These positive or *self-enhancing reasons* (Beckmeyer & Jamison, 2023a, 2023c) underscore the benefits of being single. For example, singlehood can be experienced as a source of strength, can provide space for self-development, can give time to consider priorities and what one wants and be a way to accomplish professional and individual goals (Bear & Offer, 2023; Beckmeyer & Jamison, 2023a; Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009). This is what Beckmeyer and Jamison (2023a) named *self-focused singlehood.* As being in a relationship takes time and energy, being single gives space to focus entirely on educational, professional and individual aspirations.

Singlehood could be experienced as empowering when individuals attach great importance to autonomy and freedom (Apostolou et al., 2020; Simpson, 2016; Tessler, 2023). In a relationship, individuals need to strike a balance between their autonomy and their partner's needs. Some people do not want to compromise their autonomy and, therefore, do not want to commit. If someone values autonomy, the benefits of a relationship may not outweigh sacrificing some of your autonomy. Consequently, one can choose to stay single and opt for more casual relationships instead of committed ones. People may want to spend more time with family and friends without being held accountable to anyone (Apostolou et al., 2020). Therefore, singlehood could be seen as a way to build a network and maintain many relationships with friends and family instead of one romantic relationship (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009; Simpson, 2016). DePaulo (2023a, p. 390) described it as "valuing 'The Ones' instead of 'The One'". Research has shown that single individuals' strength lies in establishing strong relationships with friends and family: they stay in touch more often and are more involved (Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2016).

Singlehood as a deliberate choice

Researchers looked extensively into whether being single is a desired status since a growing number of individuals deliberately choose to remain single (Kislev, 2023). For example, Kislev showed in his article that 23% of single people aged 18

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and above did not want to have a partner, indicating that their single status is desired. Similarly, Beckmeyer and Jamison (2023a) found in their research that 30% of their single respondents between 18 and 35 agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: "I prefer being single to being in a romantic relationship." In this respect, researchers distinguished various typologies to classify single people.

Usually, single people are placed within a binary division. One end of this binary division is that singlehood is experienced as involuntary and thus an undesired status. Involuntary singlehood (Stein, 1981) or normative singlehood (Bear & Offer, 2023) are single individuals because of external elements or circumstances. According to the existing literature, these individuals are dissatisfied with their status and aspire to find a romantic partner. They want to find a partner but cannot find one (involuntary-temporary), or they have stopped looking for one (involuntary-stable). The other end of this binary division is that being single is voluntary and thus a chosen status. Voluntary singlehood (Stein, 1981) or challenging singlehood (Bear & Offer, 2023) arises when single people deliberately choose to be single. They are happy with their single status and see it as a legitimate alternative to a committed romantic relationship. Individuals can consciously choose to be single for a certain period (voluntary-temporary) or permanently (voluntary-stable).

Bear and Offer (2023) bring a nuance to the academic discourse by looking into the concept and perception of choice. They found that participants of the involuntary or normative singlehood type often saw their single status as a result of various life circumstances, even though many of them chose to stay single. For example, they gave reasons such as not wanting to make the same mistakes their parents had made, not wanting to compromise on a partner, not being financially stable, and, therefore, not committing to a long-term relationship. However, the participants experienced their singlehood as undesired and did not feel they had consciously chosen it. This means that when we categorize individuals as voluntary or involuntary single, they do not always experience this similarly.

In more recent research, as Beckmeyer and Jamison (2023a) suggested, singlehood is considered beyond this binary division of voluntary-involuntary. For instance, Kislev (2023) suggested in his article that there is a need to see singlehood as an identity besides singlehood by circumstances and singlehood by choice. Singlehood as an identity goes beyond singlehood as a relationship status, with being single often seen as a residual category (Kislev, 2023; Kislev & Marsh, 2023). Singlehood is a social category and identity in itself and is thus a way people see themselves. For example, single individuals could be "single at heart" (DePaulo, 2023a, 2023b) or, in Kislev's (2023) words, consider their singlehood as "a core identity". This means that individuals feel better when not in a relationship, feel that this is their authentic selves, and consider a single life as their best life. Another example of a study that approaches singlehood beyond the

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binary division of voluntary-involuntary is Tessler's (2023) article on the stability of singlehood. She argues that singlehood can differ in stability depending on people's *openness to a romantic relationship* and their *desire for romantic relationships.* Singlehood is less stable if an individual is open to and desires a romantic relationship. At the same time, singlehood can be more stable if single people are closed to and have a low desire for a romantic relationship. With the notion of stability of singlehood, the author refers to what Stein (1981) called stable and temporary singlehood but adds that stability depends on openness to and desire for a relationship and, therefore, sees stability in being single as fluid rather than binary.

Developmental tasks

Havighurst's (1948) concept of developmental tasks provides a useful lens for examining how emerging adults approach relationship planning, as it frames such planning as part of age-graded social expectations and personal development milestones. Applying this framework helps uncover how individuals internalize or resist normative life scripts related to romantic relationships during the transition to adulthood.

More specifically, developmental tasks are defined as socially, psychologically and biologically determined activities or goals individuals are expected to achieve in each life stage (Havighurst, 1948). According to Havighurst (1948), completing a developmental task leads to happiness and success with later tasks, while failure leads to unhappiness, rejection by society, and struggles with later tasks. An assumption behind developmental tasks is that individuals obtain competencies that enable them to be independent while adapting and integrating into society, leading to acquiring social membership roles (Hurrelmann & Quenzel, 2018). Research distinguishes emerging and salient developmental tasks that individuals face throughout their lives. *Emerging developmental tasks* are activities, goals or behaviors expected at a particular life stage but for which individuals are not fully ready to accomplish (Bowker & Etkin, 2016). By contrast, *salient developmental tasks* are activities, goals or behaviors that individuals should be ready to accomplish at that point in their lives.

Developmental tasks in young adulthood

Trying to get a grip on one's life is the overarching developmental task in the transition to adulthood because many developmental tasks occur during this period (Schulenberg et al., 2004). Schulenberg et al. (2004) introduced seven

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developmental domains with salient tasks during this transitional life stage: peer involvement, romantic involvement, education, work, citizenship, healthy lifestyle and financial independence. According to Arnett (2000), emerging adulthood is a life stage in which identity exploration plays a major role in domains such as love, work and worldview. The process of identity formation starts in adolescence but continues and takes place mainly in emerging adulthood. Consequently, this phase of life can be perceived as busy and intense. Concerning romantic involvement, Shulman and Connolly (2013) proposed a *transitional emerging adult romantic stage* in which young adults try integrating their career paths and life plans with those of a romantic partner. The authors argued that the challenges accompanying this integration are unique to the life stage of young adults.

Frames like the Developmental Task Theory are used in singlehood research on young adults to explain the rise in single young adults. This theory states that during young adulthood, there are several developmental tasks young adults need to accomplish, one of which is *romantic involvement* (Schulenberg et al., 2004). Because there are many developmental tasks to fulfill, young adults may need to prioritize some tasks over others because it is impossible to accomplish all of them simultaneously. In the transition to adulthood, young adults are held responsible for coordinating dyadic commitment with individual life plans (Shulman & Connolly, 2013). Young adults' decisions about which developmental task to prioritize can impact whether, how, and when they seek a romantic relationship (Schulenberg et al., 2004).

Diversity in developmental tasks prioritization: The role of socio-economic and demographic characteristics

Research on developmental tasks suggests diversity in the prioritization of specific tasks based on socio-economic and demographic characteristics. Kislev and Marsh (2023) suggested to approach singlehood from an intersectional angle, where singlehood interfaces with other social categories. Regarding gender, the literature on developmental tasks states that although women study longer and participate more in the labor market, which may intentionally delay entering into a relationship, research found that mainly single women feel pressured to get married (Billari & Philipov, 2004; Budgeon, 2016; Lahad, 2017). Single women are often faced with negative stereotyping, and their singlehood is often seen as a deficit despite the decreasing importance of traditional gender and family norms (Budgeon, 2016). Nevertheless, men also experience pressure to form a family (Bear & Offer, 2023).

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Concerning educational level, empirical research found an educational gradient in almost all European countries in singlehood after leaving home, meaning that higher-educated individuals are more likely to live single after leaving home than lower-educated individuals (van den Berg, 2023a). Moreover, the norm of living independently after leaving home, before moving in with a partner, is stronger among higher-educated individuals than lower-educated ones (Liefbroer & Billari, 2010). Other research found that participation in the educational system delays union formation (Blossfeld & Huinink, 1991). Therefore, it seems possible that higher-educated individuals are more likely to postpone romantic involvement consciously. Kislev (2019) identified several forces that could explain this trend. Higher levels of education have both direct and indirect effects on partnering patterns. First, the direct effect is that individuals who are still in education may choose to fully focus on their studies.

Second, an indirect effect is that higher levels of education may indicate a stronger career orientation. Furthermore, higher education levels are associated with higher income levels, making it easier to live alone. Another possible explanation is that higher levels of education are linked to values such as independence and individualism, which may reduce the social pressure to partner and start a family. This trend of higher-educated individuals being more likely to postpone romantic involvement is especially evident among women. Research by van den Berg (2023b) found that the educational gradient in single living after leaving home is more significant among women than men. This implied that most lower-educated and middle-educated women still moved in with a partner when leaving the parental home. In contrast, higher-educated women were more likely to live single after leaving home. This difference between lower- and higher-educated individuals was larger among women than men.

Regarding ethnicity and religion, Bear and Offer (2023) found in their research on the social meanings and narratives of singlehood among unpartnered adults in Israel, a country with a strong marriage culture and religiosity, that single individuals often felt pressured to get married by family, friends and acquaintances. In that same study, some respondents from highly religious and traditional families distanced themselves from their communities because these communities expected them to marry, and they deliberately chose to stay single to focus on education and careers. Generally, research found that not being financially independent can be a reason for singlehood, consciously or not, as financial instability causes uncertainty (Bear & Offer, 2023; Stone et al., 2011). On the contrary, other research found that women with limited labor market opportunities and a migration background often opt for family formation and see it as an "alternative career" to cope with their uncertainties in the labor market (Wood & Neels, 2017). Thus, women with a migration background may attach more importance to the developmental task of family formation.

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Methodology

Participants

The sample of this study consisted of individuals who considered themselves single at the moment of the interview. As we focus on young adulthood in this book chapter, we targeted single people in the age range of 24 to 40 because the literature on young adulthood proposes that it is a prolonged stage in the life course in which many developmental tasks occur (Arnett, 2007; Beckmeyer & Jamison, 2023c; Shulman & Connolly, 2013). A second reason for this age range is that we want to gain insights into life course plans and developmental tasks such as education, work, and romantic involvement. Therefore, it is appropriate that participants have already completed their education or at least a large part of it.

Table 1 summarizes the main characteristics of the respondents, comprising gender, age, educational level, occupation, sexual orientation, and ethnic identification. Participants were between 24 and 37 years old, most younger than 30. Nineteen participants identified themselves as male, 25 as female, and no participants identified their gender as "other". Except for one participant, all participants were medium to highly educated, with a majority being highly educated. Most participants had a job, five were looking for a job and four were still studying. Thirty-six participants were heterosexual, two homosexual and one bisexual. The majority of the participants identified themselves as Belgian.

Table 1. Main Characteristics of Respondents (N= 44)

Age		Sexual orientation	
Mean	27.1 year	Heterosexual	36
Minimum	24 year	Homosexual	2
Maximum	37 year	Bisexual	1
Number of participants aged < 30	36	No answer	5
Number of participants aged ≥ 30	8		
Gender		Ethnic identification[1]	
Men	19	Belgian	37
Women	25	Dutch	2
Educational level[2]		Italian	1
Low	1	Eastern European	1
Middle	10	Sub-Saharan African	1

1 What country/ethnicity(ies) do you identify with? (Multiple answers possible).

2 Highly educated (Higher education degree) – Medium educated (Secondary education diploma) – Low-educated (Anything below a secondary education diploma).

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High	33	Congolese	1
Occupation		Afghan	1
Working	35	No Answer	5
Student	4		
Job seeking	5		

Data Collection

Data were collected through 44 semi-structured in-depth interviews conducted by students of the host institution's Qualitative Research Course. The first and second authors constructed the semi-structured interview lead based on empirical and theoretical literature. In-depth discussions about the meanings and connotations of phrasings were held before the interviews took place. Additionally, the interview lead was reviewed by three single persons to ensure that we did not make assumptions and biases and that the questions reflected single individuals' experiences. Social science students at the university, who were trained in interview techniques, conducted the interviews. Students were second-year bachelors in the educational program of social sciences. No students were allowed to interview singles with whom they had close ties (such as their kin or friends). The students were evaluated on the quality of the contribution. Working with student interviews entails quality risks, e.g., students may commit fraud, deliver poor quality interviews, or fail in some elementary aspects of interviewing or transcription, so we took some measures.

The elaborative sample was controlled via sampled respondent calls, video data, closed coding similarity and a respondent check. The sampling can be considered convenience sampling as students had to find respondents using their network. To ensure neutrality, criteria were set that ensured that students were in no direct contact with the friends or family of the interviewed individuals.

The interviews were part of a larger data collection and focused broadly on participants' life course, experiences as a single person and relationship histories and experiences. For the purposes of this study, particular attention was given to participants' reflections on past events and future plans, without any imposed time constraints. Participants were asked about how they had envisioned their lives in the past (e.g., "If you had created a timeline in the past, which events would you have included that are not present on your current timeline?"); how they currently viewed their position in life (e.g., "To what extent are you where you had hoped to be?"); and how they imagined their future, without being asked to project their plans within a specific time frame (e.g., "To what extent do you make personal life plans?"). In addition, participants were asked to consider how

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their future aspirations might relate to their relationship status (e.g., "Are there things you would still like to achieve before entering a long-term relationship?"). They were also invited to reflect on the role a partner might play in achieving or complicating future goals (e.g., "What are some things you would still like to achieve in life?" followed by "To what extent do you think you need a partner to achieve these goals?" and "To what extent might having a partner make it more difficult to realize them?"). All interviews were transcribed verbatim after their completion.

Data analysis

We imported the transcripts into NVivo, which allowed us to code the interviews in a structured way (Mortelmans, 2025). We first coded the questions thematically, which allowed us to select specific themes: life course planning, self-described reason for singlehood, availability as a romantic partner, relationship desire, fears and insecurities regarding relationships, and prospects. The coding process was carried out as described in Mortelmans (2020). We started with open coding: we divided the interviews into smaller parts by assigning labels to responses relevant to answering the research question. Simultaneously, we applied axial coding: we reduced the number of codes by combining open codes into overarching concepts. Furthermore, we used selective coding by relating concepts to each other. The open, axial and selective coding processes ran interchangeably throughout the whole coding process.

We organized a respondent debriefing where we presented our preliminary results. This provided space for respondents who participated in our study to discuss the results and give feedback.

Ethics

This study was approved by the Ethical Committee for the Social Sciences and Humanities of the University of Antwerp (Reference SHW_2023_49_1). We obtained written informed consent from all participants.

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Results

Types of developmental plans

We identified six ideal types of developmental plans in our data: educational plans, career plans, housing plans, relationship plans, family plans and self-focused plans. These types of plans are key to answering our research question. We will briefly describe these plans and then elaborate on our research question. We describe these plans separately, but they are often linked in most interviews.

Individuals with *educational plans* discussed plans related to starting or completing an education program. *Career plans* often appeared after completion of educational plans and involve considering desired jobs, either based on one's studies or not, as well as future career and employment aspirations. *Housing plans* frequently emerged after completing educational plans and undertaking career plans. These are all types of plans regarding leaving the parental home, renting or buying a property, choosing where to live (e.g., abroad, in the city, in the countryside) and how to live, and deciding whether to live with a (romantic) partner. The last types of plans are based on different types of relationships.

This book chapter focuses on *romantic relationship plans*, including plans about whether one wants a romantic partner in the future, the extent to which one actively seeks a partner (e.g., choosing to use dating apps), and considerations about marriage. Romantic relationship plans often align with *family plans*, which primarily involve decisions about wanting and having children and whether doing so requires a romantic relationship or partner. Finally, *self-focused plans* deal with self-development, self-knowledge, the search for one's identity, achieving personal goals and pursuing activities independently.

From planning to letting go: How young adults approach romantic relationships

Our analysis found young adults who plan their relationship status and young adults who do not. We identified several ideal types of single young adults for both cases based on how they approach relationship planning (see Table 2 for an overview). These "ideal types" are analytical constructs (Weber, 1949) developed to capture recurring patterns in our qualitative data, and are not meant to imply any normative hierarchy. As such, they may not be fully applicable to every single young adult, but rather serve as tools to illustrate commonalities across diverse individual narratives. Nonetheless, they contribute to a better understanding of relationship trajectories in young adults and add diversity to the academic discourse on singlehood by moving beyond the binary distinction between voluntary and involuntary singlehood.

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Table 2. Overview of Ideal Types of Single Young Adults and Their Approach to Relationship Planning

Ideal Type	Planner type	Approach to Relationship Planning	Main Motivation
Life Course Planner	Relationship planner	Has a detailed relationship and family plan	Desire for parenthood; classic life course ideal
Developmental Task Accomplisher	Relationship planner	Plans indirectly by focusing on achieving developmental tasks	Belief that accomplishments increase chances of partnering
Childfree Non-Seeker	Non-planner	Does not plan romantic involvement	No desire for children; no pressure to find a partner
Personal Development Prioritizer	Non-planner	Avoids planning to focus on personal goals	Sees relationships as distraction or risk
Confident Non-Seeker	Non-planner	No active planning; adopts passive approach	Belief that love will happen naturally; content with singlehood

Young adults with a plan: From parenthood dreams to goal-driven connections

The first two ideal types consist of respondents who had planned their relationship status. We distinguished two ideal types of relationship planners: the *life course planner* and the *developmental task accomplisher.*

Connecting first, parenting later: The life course planner

Life course planners are single young adults who proactively set and pursue specific goals related to key life stages, especially in the areas of relationships, marriage, and family formation. These respondents often envision a classic normative family path, meaning their narratives reflect normative and idealized plans. They hold strongly to the classic family ideal: getting into a relationship, getting married and having children. For these individuals, marriage is seen as a crucial step that should precede starting a family. Many respondents indicated that when they were younger they would follow this classic family path, but as they grew older, they realized in retrospect that this was merely a societal norm and distanced themselves from it. However, we found some respondents in our data who actually adhered to this classic family ideal, whom we consider *life course planners.*

Life course planners' relationship plans are closely tied to their desire to have children. To fulfill this desire, they carefully map out their life course, often setting tight deadlines. As a result, age deadlines frequently appear in their

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narratives, with age 30 standing out as an important symbolic threshold. While respondents generally do not aim to have children precisely at 30, they perceive this age as a symbolic turning point, signaling that they need to take concrete steps to realize their desire for children in the years following this symbolic birthday. From this turning point onwards, they feel the urgency to find a partner within three to five years, settle down, achieve financial stability, and get married, recognizing that time is running out because they believe they must act before it is too late (hereby referring to an imagined biological age of secondary sterility). Because *life course planners* strongly adhere to the classic family path, they view having a romantic partner as essential for completing the developmental task of parenthood. In this respect, *life course planners* often experience time pressure stemming from their biological clock.

> The plan is to find a partner at least before I'm 35, preferably earlier, at my 33. […] At 33, I'm living together; then I have to speed up a bit because, at 34, I also have to get married. So, getting married, I'll be 34. Oh my goodness, I have time pressure. I'll be 35 by then when I have my first child! No way. Maybe we should move forward with getting married or finding a partner. I'm already 30. (Eva, woman, 30 years)

Accomplishing first, connecting later: The developmental task accomplisher

Developmental task accomplishers are single young adults who prioritize achieving specific personal goals – such as career stability or independence – before committing to a relationship, believing that accomplishing these tasks will make it easier to find a partner. Since achieving these developmental tasks is a function of finding a romantic partner, this approach can be considered a form of relationship planning. *Developmental task accomplishers* believe they increase their chances of finding a partner by creating opportunities to meet like-minded individuals and enhancing their independence and attractiveness in two ways. First, undertaking a new developmental task creates a new environment where they can meet new people, including potential partners. Additionally, they assume that individuals they meet while undertaking similar developmental tasks will likely be more like-minded, sharing similar goals and values, making them better-suited potential partners.

Second, *developmental task accomplishers* think that completing specific developmental tasks makes them more appealing to potential partners by increasing their independence or enhancing their physical and mental attractiveness. Jonathan (man, 27 years) explained, "I think if you start living alone, have a good, stable job, and are financially stable, you will be in a better position in the partner market. They see you as a responsible person."

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Young adults without a plan: Living childfree, avoiding distractions, and letting life happen

The majority of the participants did not have a relationship plan. We found three ideal types of non-planners in our data: the *childfree non-seeker*, the *personal development prioritizer* and the *confident non-seeker.*

No desire for parenthood: The childfree non-seeker

Childfree non-seekers are individuals who consciously choose not to pursue romantic relationships because they do not desire children. For this ideal type, the desire for a relationship is bound to a more latent desire to have children. While the formerly described *life course planners* link their relationship plan directly to the desire to have children, *childfree non-seekers*, in contrast, do not have a relationship plan because they do not desire children. As Nathalie (woman, 31 years) explained, "I don't have a desire for children, which helps. […] So I don't need to ensure I've met the love of my life or the father of my children." Without the pressure of a biological clock, they see no need to search for a partner actively. Some *childfree non-seekers* even condition their desire for children on whether they find a partner in the future, despite not actively searching for one. This serves as a coping mechanism to avoid disappointment if parenthood becomes unattainable.

Personal fulfillment first: The personal development prioritizer

Personal development prioritizers are single young adults who focus on completing personal developmental tasks – such as building a career or rediscovering themselves – before considering a romantic relationship. Unlike *developmental task accomplishers*, who see these tasks as stepping stones to making relationships easier, *personal development prioritizers* view relationships as potential distractions from their goals. This ideal type wants to complete (a) specific developmental task(s) before possibly committing to a relationship, though finding a partner is not necessarily their goal. For this reason, they do not have a relationship plan. *Personal development prioritizers* believe a romantic relationship can get in the way of achieving other developmental tasks. They view a relationship as a potential distraction from completing another developmental task and consider combining the two incompatible. When respondents talk about this idea, they often mention restricting their freedom as a single person because they would have to consider their partner.

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> I don't want a relationship because I want to build my career first. Because I hesitate to work abroad or to do something in Belgium. I hesitate to become self-employed or not. I want to have that choice fixed first before I commit to someone. Because I also feel that when you're in a relationship, you no longer choose what you want for yourself. You unconsciously always take someone else into account. (Louis, man, 25 years)

Along with this belief that relationships can interfere with personal development, many *personal development prioritizers* also feel that taking time for themselves is crucial, particularly after long-term relationships. As a result, they may choose to temporarily avoid committing to a romantic partner. They may even avoid entering a relationship to eliminate the challenge of balancing the maintenance of a relationship with other developmental tasks.

Certain *personal development prioritizers* also believe that committing to a romantic partner may threaten the developmental tasks they have already achieved. One respondent, for instance, expressed fear that entering into a new relationship could jeopardize the stability she had built in her home:

> I am especially afraid for my home if I enter into a new relationship, in the sense of: should I share this place? What if it goes wrong? […] I would get really stressed about that if he said 'I'm coming to live here', I think. Not that I don't love that person, but I've put so much effort into buying my own place, I've done that on my own and then to risk all that. Yes, that does determine things. (Marie, woman, 33 years)

Personal development prioritizers tend to have a broader and more flexible view of family formation, with less adherence to the traditional family ideal, to which *life course planners* attach great importance. For instance, one woman who had just ended a relationship at age 21 decided that if she had not met a partner by 30, she would choose to become a single mother. This decision illustrates how *personal development prioritizers* prioritize personal goals – like having children – over traditional relationship ideals.

Trusting the process: the confident non-seeker

Confident non-seekers are single young adults who do not actively plan or focus on developmental tasks, especially regarding relationships. While *personal development prioritizers* take time off to work on themselves, *confident non-seekers* take time off in a different way: they do not want to actively spend time looking for the right partner and prefer a more passive approach to love and relationships. These individuals believe that love must happen naturally and remain open to dating if a strong connection arises spontaneously. While confident this will eventually happen, they are also content with their single status. One respondent shared his perspective on this approach: "I don't want to actively spend time looking for the right partner, I'll meet her somewhere" (Thomas, man, 29 years).

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Another respondent echoed this sentiment, explaining that he does not believe in putting in a lot of effort for little reward: "You have to put in a lot of time and effort to get very little out of it" (Arthur, man, 26 years). *Confident non-seekers* do not want a partner for the sake of having one but instead, strongly emphasize the added value a partner must have. Like one respondent said: "I'm not actively searching for a partner just to have one. It will happen when the time is right." (Thomas, man, 29 years).

Discussion

With this study, we examined the assumption that young adults intentionally plan their relationships as part of the *Developmental Tasks* framework and challenge the traditional view of singlehood as a temporary phase before settling down. Even though we did not have a representative sample, we were struck that few of our respondents had a relationship plan, while the majority did not. Through qualitative data analysis, we identified five ideal types of single young adults: Life Course Planners, Developmental Task Accomplishers, Childfree Non-Seekers, Personal Development Prioritizers, and Confident Non-Seekers. These "ideal types" are analytical constructs (Weber, 1949) developed to capture recurring patterns in our qualitative data, not normative categories.

Given that we identified these different ideal types of single young adults in our data, we showed that singlehood cannot be understood in black-and-white terms, as it is shaped by a complex interplay of personal choices, societal expectations, and external circumstances. Understanding singlehood among young adults goes beyond the binary division of voluntary-involuntary singlehood, as proposed by Stein (1981). This study contributes to understanding this complexity, especially among young adults. As previous research (Beckmeyer & Jamison, 2023c; Billari & Liefbroer, 2010; Schulenberg et al., 2004; Shulman & Connolly, 2013) has extensively documented the number of developmental tasks young adults are expected to accomplish during the transition from adolescence to adulthood, our study focused more in-depth on the lived experiences of how these young adults (self-)define these tasks and approach their relationship trajectories.

Our data partially confirmed the underlying assumption of the developmental task theory when used to explain the number of single young adults. This theoretical framework suggests that young adults prioritize specific tasks due to the numerous responsibilities they must fulfill during the transition to adulthood and thus plan their relationships (Schulenberg et al., 2004). We identified two ideal types of young adults with a relationship plan in our data: *life course planners* and *developmental task accomplishers.* Remarkably, these ideal types

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use specific developmental tasks to achieve another task: for *life course planners*, this is parenting, while for *developmental task accomplishers*, it is establishing a romantic relationship. *Life course planners*, for example, carefully map out their life course (e.g., being financially stable, finding a partner, marrying) to fulfill their desire for children and aim to follow the classic family path in doing so, consistent with findings that, although young adults' priorities have changed over time, they still attach importance to marriage (Keldal & Şeker, 2022). *Developmental task accomplishers* view completing developmental tasks such as education, work, and leaving the parental home as what Apostolou (2017) and Apostolou et al. (2020) called a "fitness-increasing strategy" because they believe that doing so will make it easier for them to find a romantic partner. An important nuance is that *life course planners* and *developmental task accomplishers* were often not aware that they were planning their relationship. When asked about life course plans and aspirations, they often said they had *not* planned their lives.

We also identified three ideal types of single young adults who did not have a relationship plan, indicating that they do not align with the developmental task argument used to explain singlehood among young adults: *childfree non-planners, personal development prioritizers,* and *confident non-seekers.* These ideal types do not feel the need to settle down with a partner after their adolescence, which theories on romantic stage development and traditional life course theories do assume (Connolly et al., 2004; Connolly & Goldberg, 1999; Elder Jr, 1975; Furman & Collins, 2009; Neugarten & Datan, 1973; Seiffge-Krenke, 2003). Like Tessler (2023) made a distinction in her article between openness to and desire for a romantic relationship, these types do not desire a relationship. Still, they are often open to one, though they are not proactive about it. *Childfree Non-Seekers*, for instance, ascribe the absence of a relationship plan to not having a desire to have children. As Kislev (2019) described, lowering fertility rates implies that the birth of the first child may be delayed, as may finding a partner; this can also be extended to not wanting children. Kislev (2019) explained that this requires individuals to take their biological clock into account later in life; individuals who do not want children, such as *childfree non-seekers*, do not even have to take this into account anymore and, therefore, do not have to look for a partner in their opinion.

Personal Development Prioritizers want to accomplish other developmental tasks and believe that a romantic relationship can get in the way of achieving these or can threaten already accomplished ones. This aligns with what Beckmeyer and Jamison (2023a) defined as *self-focused singlehood* when singlehood gives individuals space to entirely focus on educational, professional, and individual goals. *Confident non-seekers* prefer a more passive approach to love and relationships, as they do not want to actively spend time searching for a partner

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and believe that love should happen to them naturally. This challenges the "transitional emerging adult romantic stage" proposed by Shulman and Connolly (2013) in which, according to the authors, young adults try integrating their career paths and life plans with those of a romantic partner, implicitly assuming that young adults are actively engaged in this process.

In addition to identifying these five ideal types of single young adults and analyzing them separately, we also noted that individuals may switch between these ideal types over time, depending on their environment, aspirations, priorities and situation at that moment. Although we did not have longitudinal data, we found young adults in our data that could be assigned to multiple ideal types depending on their specific life stages. For instance, one respondent emphasized career goals and self-development, aligning with the *personal development prioritizer* type. At the same time, he did not want to put much effort into dating and believed he would meet the right partner one day, which is in line with the *confident non-seeker* type. However, he also expressed a desire to find a partner once his goals were met — suggesting a potential shift toward a *relationship planner* type:

> I want to have done a few more things with the freedom I have now before I limit that freedom. At the moment, I don't have to take anyone into account and when you're in a relationship you do. In other words, decisions to do or realize certain things are easier now. That's why I want to have done a few more things without anyone having anything to say about it before I would enter into a relationship. (Arthur, man, 26 years)

A better understanding of how and why young adults switch between states could provide important insights into the relationship trajectories of young adults and could lead to a deeper understanding of what Tessler (2023) called the stability of singlehood, moving beyond the idea that being single is temporary.

Even though our sample was not diverse regarding socio-economic and demographic characteristics, we found some differences between the ideal types. Our findings suggest that women are more focused on and think more about family plans, making them more represented in the *life course planner* and *childfree non-seeker* types than men. Despite the declining importance of traditional gender and family norms (Budgeon, 2016; Lahad, 2017), women are still affected by the need to consider their so-called *biological clock.* Age also appears to play an important role in considerations about family plans. The symbolic milestone of age 30 makes these ideal types reflect on their future, whereas this concern is absent in the narratives of individuals under 30. Consistent with research by Hall and Willoughby (2016), who identified five centrality profiles based on young adults' imagined career, marital and parenthood roles – and found that men were more represented in the *Career Centered Group* – our study revealed that men were more concerned about their careers than women. For

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developmental task accomplishers, this was because they believed it would make them more appealing. For *personal development prioritizers*, it was because they wanted to be certain about their career paths without the influence of a partner.

While our study provides valuable insights into the relationship trajectories of young adults, also limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. Firstly, as indicated above, our study sample was not diverse and is not representative of all single young adults. Our sample primarily consisted of highly educated, heterosexual men and women without a migration background. More intersectional research, as proposed by Kislev and Marsh (2023), could bring more nuance to the ideal types we found. Secondly, even though we found indications suggesting that young adults may shift between different ideal types, cross-sectional data are insufficient to understand this fully. Qualitative longitudinal data could provide a deeper understanding of young adults' dynamic relationship trajectories as their circumstances and priorities change.

Despite these limitations, the identified ideal types show that the relationship and life course trajectories of single young adults represent a dynamic and complex interplay of personal choices, societal expectations, and external circumstances, and are not always a matter of deliberate planning. These ideal types can contribute to a better and more nuanced understanding of singlehood and relationship trajectories among young adults, particularly in how they navigate relationship aspirations alongside other life goals. A major conclusion we can draw from this research is that relationship aspirations in many (yet not all) cases align with parenthood aspirations, and the latter may partially explain the planning behavior of single adults in this age group.

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Chapter Four. Evolving Families, Aging Singles: A Study of Singlehood and Ageism in India

Abstract
Family structures in India are undergoing a significant transformation, driven by changing societal norms, economic independence, and evolving attitudes toward singlehood. This article delves into the intersection of singlehood and ageism in India, analyzing how aging singles navigate a society steeped in traditional family expectations, within the framework of Singles Studies. Popularized by Bella DePaulo, Singles Studies identifies diverse identities like single by choice, single by circumstance, single at heart, socially single, and legally single, each with unique challenges and advantages. The article examines the societal expectations and marginalization faced by single and elderly individuals across colonial and postcolonial periods. Drawing from both classic and contemporary literature, as well as the works of Bella DePaulo, Ketaki Chowkhani, Jagriti Gangopadhyay, and others, this analysis explores how singlehood and ageism overlap in cross-cultural contexts, revealing the complexities of personal experiences and societal perceptions to answering the most frequently confronted question by singles in an “amatonormative” (Elizabeth Brake, 2012) society, “Who will care for you in old age?”. By examining the diverse approaches to solitude, the study sheds light on how age and life satisfaction influence the evolving paths of single individuals in India. The study delves into how aging singles combat loneliness and ageism by fostering non-traditional family structures, such as peer communities, co-living arrangements, and chosen families. By addressing ageism through self-care, social networking, and policy advocacy, these communities are challenging and empowering single individuals to age with dignity and independence. Ultimately, this article positions singlehood not as a state of lack but as a transformative space that offers resilience, adaptability, and new forms of belonging in a rapidly changing India that celebrates singlehood as a viable and empowering way of life, ensuring support systems that cater to the needs of this growing demographic.
Keywords: Singlehood; ageism; loneliness; well-being; stereotypes; choice

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Introduction

India, with its rich tradition of family and togetherness, has long celebrated the concept of *vasudhaiva kutumbakam*—the world as one family, as proclaimed in the Mahopanishad: *"Ayam nijah paro veti ganana laghuchetasam; udaracharitanam tu vasudhaiva kutumbakam"* (This one is mine, that one is yours—such thoughts are for the narrow-minded; for the magnanimous, the whole world is one family).(*Mahopanishad*, Chapter 6, Verse 71) Rooted in this ethos, South Asian culture has historically emphasized interdependence, caregiving, and the sanctity of familial bonds. India, often celebrated as the land of Shravan Kumar and the ideal of filial piety, has long upheld the virtue of family devotion and intergenerational care. (Savnani, 28) With life expectancy rising and fertility rates falling, the proportion of older adults in the population is growing rapidly. Simultaneously, marriage rates are declining, and younger generations are delaying or opting out of marriage altogether, giving rise to the community of single people.

India is undergoing significant demographic changes that mirror global trends. A notable demographic trend in both developing and developed countries today is the rapid growth of the aging population. According to the United Nations (2009), population aging refers to the significant rise in the number of individuals aged 60 and older. In the 20th century, the proportion of people in this age group increased across the globe. At the start of the new millennium, around 600 million people worldwide were aged 60 or older, a figure expected to rise dramatically due to improvements in life expectancy. In India, the population aged 60 and above was approximately 88 million in 2009, and this number is projected to reach around 315 million by 2050. (Bharti & Singh, 2013) As such, the 21st century has been aptly termed the "Era of Population Aging" (Prakash, 1994), presenting significant challenges for policymakers globally.

This changing demographic and social landscape has led to an increasing number of single older adults, a group that remains underrepresented in both policy and public discourse. In India, where family is the cornerstone of social identity, singlehood remains a condition fraught with stigma, particularly in later life. Societal expectations tied to marriage, parenthood, and caregiving have long dominated the cultural narrative, leaving little room for those who remain unmarried or childless. Yet, as societal dynamics shift and more individuals embrace singlehood—by choice or circumstance—the rigid boundaries of traditional family structures are being redefined. In this evolving landscape, ageism and singlehood intersect, challenging the very fabric of how we perceive support, companionship, and belonging.

The term ageism was coined by Robert N. Butler in 1968 to highlight the negative stereotyping and discrimination faced by older individuals. It was of-

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ficially added to the Oxford English Dictionary in 1969. (Bakshi & Chakravarti, 2024) R. N. Butler, the famous American gerontologist, defines, "Ageism can be seen as a systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin color and gender." (Butler, 1989) For older adults, this marginalization becomes doubly oppressive, as ageism compounds the challenges of navigating life outside the conventional family structure. (Lamb, 2018) Ageism specifically impacts singles by reinforcing the notion that their lives are incomplete or less valuable without traditional family roles such as marriage or parenthood. For older singles, especially women, this often leads to social exclusion, diminished respect, and lack of adequate care or policy support as they age. (Lamb, 2018) In the Indian scenario, ageism deeply affects older singles by aligning with the culturally entrenched belief that marriage and family are essential for a meaningful life. Older single individuals—particularly women—are often viewed as social anomalies, facing suspicion, pity, or neglect. Without spouses or children to support them, they frequently experience exclusion from community events, lack of caregiving, and are overlooked in both family decisions and public policies. This marginalization is intensified by the erosion of the joint family system, which once offered at least a semblance of interdependence and care in old age. (Agewell Foundation, 2021) In an era of rapid demographic and cultural shifts, however, the intersection of singlehood and aging is emerging as a critical area of inquiry.

In India, societal acceptance of single individuals has evolved significantly from colonial times to the present. During the colonial era, being single, especially for women, was stigmatized, often seen as a failure to fulfill familial roles. Over time, as education, urbanization, and economic independence grew, singlehood gained gradual acceptance. Today, singles are increasingly celebrated for their autonomy, career focus, and self-reliance, though societal pressures and traditional norms still persist in many areas. (Lamb, 2018) This transformation reflects a balancing act between modernity and deeply rooted cultural expectations.

These singletons are about to become the unsung heroes of the ageing population. With fewer children being born (thanks, economic stress and avocado toast), the future will have a lot of older folks who need a helping hand. Enter the singles! They'll be the ones stepping in playing a major role in this increasingly wrinkled world, whether by choice or necessity, to assist with caregiving, support, and volunteering—making sure Grandma and Grandpa don't just spend their twilight years talking to the plants.

Singles will also fuel the economy in unexpected ways. They'll be the prime consumers of healthcare products, fitness programs, and social services designed to help the elderly live independently. In India, rising health awareness,

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particularly among urban populations, has led to increased investment in health-related services such as medical exams, gym memberships, and dietary consultations. The proliferation of health tech, including smart watches and fitness apps, reflects a growing emphasis on preventive care and self-monitoring. Additionally, the shift towards nuclear families and solo living arrangements has heightened the demand for personalized healthcare and wellness solutions. (IAEME, 2023)

These trends underscore the evolving consumer landscape, where singles actively seek products and services that support their independent lifestyles and health goals. Plus, they'll have more time to invest in relationships with friends, building the community ties that aging populations will need to thrive. In short, while singles may not be lounging on a romantic sunset cruise anytime soon, they'll be navigating an entirely different kind of voyage: one that holds the social fabric together as the world grows older and wiser. So, don't underestimate the singletons—they're about to shine in a very big way!

In India, singlehood encompasses queer individuals unable to marry due to legal and societal restrictions, placing them within this marginalized group. Queer older adults encounter additional stigma, grappling with invisibility and a lack of legal and social recognition. They navigate singlism and ageism by building strong chosen families, advocating for rights, and fostering supportive communities. By prioritizing self-care, financial independence, and visibility, they challenge stereotypes and redefine social norms. (Sharma & Subramanyam, 2020) Ageism further exacerbates these issues, portraying older individuals as burdensome and stripping them of dignity.

Yet, singlehood in old age is not uniform; for some, it is a deliberate choice for independence, while for others, it stems from societal constraints. Addressing these diverse realities requires inclusive support systems and a shift in cultural attitudes. This article will explore the intersection of singlehood and ageism in India, examining how evolving family structures, economic changes, and shifting cultural attitudes are reshaping the lives of older single adults. By delving into issues of caregiving, mental health, and economic insecurity, it seeks to illuminate the challenges and opportunities facing this overlooked population. Ultimately, it argues for the need to reimagine aging and singlehood in ways that embrace diversity and promote inclusivity in Indian society.

The continuum of ageism and singlehood: Colonial period

In India, marriage has long been more than a personal choice—it's often a social compulsion, deeply intertwined with tradition and family honor. This 'compulsory marriage' culture leaves little room for individual preference, turning a

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life milestone into a societal expectation. Dorothy Stein in her essay "Burning Widows, Burning Brides: The Perils of Daughterhood in India" describes how dowry, reducing the institution of marriage to a financial negotiation, thrives on this system, burdening families, especially those with daughters, and perpetuating gender inequality.

> "But why could an unmarried woman not live indefinitely with her natal family, just as married women can in theory dwell permanently with their husband's families? The answer to this was hinted at by Pandit Nehru in his address supporting the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, when he referred to the suicides of young women who despaired of ever being married." (Stein, 484)

In precolonial India, single women were not a homogenous group but existed within a complex social structure shaped by caste, religion, and economic status. (Uddin & Akter, 2024). The experiences of single women in India, particularly with respect to ageism, have evolved significantly over centuries, shaped by the cultural, economic, and political shifts of the precolonial, colonial, and post-independence periods. Single women—whether unmarried, widowed, or childless—have long occupied a liminal space in Indian society, often defined more by what they lack in relation to the idealized family structure than by their individual identities.

In rural areas, where traditional family structures were dominant, older single women were seen as burdensome or irrelevant, a perception that strips them of agency and dignity. The colonial economy disrupted traditional support systems, pushing older single women into deeper poverty, especially as land reforms and commercialization of agriculture eroded their access to land and livelihoods. Even in urban areas, despite increased opportunities, societal disapproval persisted. Older widows, viewed as inauspicious or unlucky, were excluded from social and religious ceremonies, and their aging bodies further reinforced stereotypes of decline and uselessness. (Niswade, 2015) Ageism, however, continued to affect older single women, particularly those without family support. Societal attitudes are particularly harsh as the cultural ideal of womanhood, often tied to roles as wives and mothers, leaves little room for alternative life paths.

The most common form of singlehood was widowhood, which, for many, was not a voluntary choice but a societal condition. The custom of child marriage was widespread, particularly in Hindu communities. The concept of *sati* (widow burning) was practiced in some regions. *Sati*, the practice of widow immolation in India, historically was seen by some as a tragic escape from the harsh realities widows faced, including social ostracism, poverty, and loss of family support. Widows often had limited property rights and were marginalized within patriarchal society, making old age and financial survival precarious. Though widely condemned today, some traditional narratives framed sati as a way to avoid these

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hardships, reflecting the complex socio-economic pressures on widows in historical India (Chakravarti, 1998; Forbes, 1996).

In Hindu society, the life of a widow was typically marked by strict societal restrictions. According to Hindu customs, a widow was considered inauspicious and was expected to lead a life of penance and austerity. (Niswade, 2015) Widows, especially those from upper-caste Hindu backgrounds, faced severe social stigma and harsh restrictions. Practices like *sati* (the immolation of widows) and enforced celibacy were indicative of the extreme marginalization of widowed women, particularly older ones, whose societal value was often seen as directly tied to their husbands. "Thapar suggests a correlation between the rise of sati and the decline of niyoga or the practice of a widow being married to her dead husband's brother; widow immolation reduced the possibilities of women marrying others within the family, or outsiders, and thus creating complications regarding inheritance." (Loomba,1993; 210) Economic castration became one of the major motives as "… women had the right to maintenance from their natal families when unmarried, and from their husbands' families after marriage." (Stein,1988; 475) While lower-caste women experienced fewer restrictions, widowhood still posed significant economic challenges, particularly for those without children or access to land and family resources.

Varanasi, the city of ghats, the river of eternal life, and, unfortunately, the land where many women – our very own *Miss Havishams* – end up spending their twilight years, shrouded in grief, loneliness, and the sheer weight of societal expectations. In Varanasi, the heart of Hindu religious life, widows found themselves in an especially painful position. The city's spiritual significance made it a place where widows from across India were sent to spend the rest of their lives in prayer and penance. Varanasi, with its sacred ghats, was viewed as the ultimate place for a widow that strips women of their status, identity, and joy, confining them to lives of ritual renunciation. Shorn of color, jewelry, and sometimes even basic dignity, many widows are sent to places like Varanasi—a city sacred for its promise of moksha (liberation)—to live out their remaining days in isolation. (Singh, 2016) However, for most of these women, Varanasi became a place of suffering rather than solace. The movie *Water* (2005), directed by Deepa Mehta, poignantly explores the harsh conditions faced by widows in colonial India, particularly in the early 20th century. Set in Varanasi in 1938, the film sheds light on the oppressive social customs that confined widows to lives of isolation, poverty, and degradation. Swati Ghosh further elaborates in her essay "Bengali widows of Varanasi",

> Hindu widows had long been excluded and ostracised. Their renouncement by the male proponents of law and religion received a social sanction wrapped under religious cover. The disavowal of the windows had always been kept under strict vigil. Widows,

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> losing the reproductive role within the family, were retained to participate in the productive activities at a very low productive cost. .. Perhaps the most obvious motive of social rejection of Hindu widows was to guarantee their disclaimer upon family property… [T]he Bengali Hindu community had contributed towards the exclusion programme of widows in a unique way. When others had marginalised the widows as individuals within family and community, the Bengalis isolated them as a social category, far from home. They were sent to places of pilgrimage in Varanasi, Vrindavan, Mathura and Nabadwip to live on small monthly allowances.
> The widows had little choice. Specially the ones without a male heir to the family property were a liability to the family. Widows were easy victims and a social eyesore – adultery, illicit relationships, increase in prostitution, abortion deaths were often associated with young widows. Deporting them to a distant land was a convenient strategy to get rid of them. (Ghosh, 1151)

Hindu scriptures like the *Manusmriti* and various religious texts reinforced the belief that widows should live a life of austerity, away from worldly pleasures. (Jha, 1920) This idea is rooted in the concept of *pativrata* (the ideal of a wife being entirely devoted to her husband), which, when subverted by widowhood, often led to the perception of widows as fallen or impure. If widows weren't sent to the sanctified lands of Varanasi, they face a life of humiliation and ostracization—talk about a *no-win* situation! Just like Indir Thakurun from Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay's *Pather Panchali*, for instance. The octogenarian, dependent, widow didn't get a free pass to society's approval. Instead, she's left to fend for herself, shunned and pitied, as her every move screams "discarded". Society practically shoves her into the margins, where the only thing more constant than her solitude is the silent judgment that follows her. Quite the grim deal for just surviving widowhood, right?

In addition to this, the caste system played a crucial role in shaping the lives of widows. (Jha, 1920) Widows from higher castes often faced social exclusion, but they were usually better off economically than their counterparts from lower castes. Widows from lower castes, particularly Dalits, often faced extreme poverty and violence. They were more likely to be exploited and denied even basic rights to property or inheritance.In Islamic and tribal communities, the norms surrounding singlehood and widowhood varied, but older single women similarly faced economic dependence and social invisibility.

Ageism also played a significant role in the precolonial context, with older women often seen as unproductive or burdensome. This perception, combined with patriarchal norms, limited the autonomy of older single women, relegating them to lives of dependency or servitude. Economically, single women, especially widows and those from marginalized castes, were crucial to agrarian economies, contributing through weaving, artisanal work, and other forms of labor. Despite

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their contributions, their work was often undervalued, and they were economically dependent on extended family structures that prioritized married women.

Even though colonial practice, western education encouraged cultural refinement and a class of 'new women' emerged, "the widows did not fit into this scheme. They ceased to be women of home as soon as they were widowed. The need for emancipation and refinement was irrelevant when her male partner had ceased to exist." (Ghosh, 1152) Rabindranath Tagore's narrative of *The Home and the World (1916)* confirms that the widow sister-in-law did not have a place in this progressive framework that Nikhilesh created for Bimala. Once a woman becomes widowed, she is symbolically removed from the 'home' and 'world'. (Tagore, 2005)

The colonial era of the twentieth century witnessed the rise of unmarried women, thanks to educational reforms that opened careers in teaching, nursing, and social work. These opportunities allowed some women to remain unmarried by choice, challenging traditional views of marriage as their ultimate goal. Christian missionary schools played a key role, creating a class of educated, financially independent women. Religious and social norms also shaped the experiences of single women.

In Hinduism, singlehood, particularly among older women, was often associated with asceticism. Women who remained unmarried either by choice or circumstance sometimes became sadhvis (religious devotees) or joined temple communities as *devadasi.* (Sreenivas, 2011) However,such roles were socially accepted only when framed as a renunciation of worldly desires, reinforcing the idea that unmarried women could only occupy marginal positions in society or they were often seen with suspicion and labeled as deviants in a marriage-centric society. Ashwini Tambe mentions the transformation in family forms in her work "Colluding Patriarchies: The Colonial Reform of Sexual Relations in India" and mentions,

> "Early British administrators, notably Warren Hastings and William Jones commissioned Hindu priests and Muslim clerics to assist translation of Hindu and Muslim religious texts in order to appear to uphold tradition and thus secure elite cooperation. The resulting official law elevated the customs and orthodoxy of higher caste to the status of a norm. The line between respectable and disrespectable sexuality became more deeply marked through new laws on legitimate marriage, patriliny, monogamy, and age of marriage. Unmarried women of various kinds-prostitutes, widows and entertainers-were, conversely devalued." (Tambe, 593)

The term 'fallen woman' became a convenient label to cast these women out of the moral fold, ensuring they remained marginalized. Society viewed their singlehood and occupation as a double betrayal: they neither adhered to the traditional roles of wife and mother nor conformed to the expectations of 're-

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spectable' femininity. Consequently, *tawaifs* and sex workers were looked down upon, shamed, and relegated to the periphery of society. (Pande, 2018)

For many widows and spinsters, their options are painfully limited. Without an education or any marketable skills, they find themselves forced to rely on their bodies to survive. So what happens when you can't pay for food, shelter, or even your basic needs? The answer is often tragic: 'desperation'. Many widows, especially those who have aged out of any semblance of 'marriageable' status, find themselves on the edge of survival, and some turn to the only options available to them. In Varanasi, this can often mean selling their bodies—working as *tawaifs* (courtesans) or prostitutes. (Pande, 2018)

The stigma surrounding their existence was not just about their profession but also about the broader fear of independent women who defied societal norms. They symbolized a form of agency—albeit a constrained one—that threatened the patriarchal order. Their economic struggles and marginalization turned their lives into a cautionary tale, reinforcing marriage as the only 'respectable' path for women. Even today, the taboo lingers. *Tawaif*, once a symbol of artistry, has been reduced to a derogatory term, and the struggles of these women remain invisible in mainstream discourse. Their history reflects the harsh realities of singlehood in a society that weaponizes morality to oppress economically vulnerable women. Sharmila Rege claims, "The women they analyze-whether widows, middle class wives, or *devadasis*-are all presumed to have a pre-formed sexuality which is then harnessed to procreative ends. It is either controlled or repressed, by the state, community, religion, or patriarchy in general." (Tambe, 596)

For men, singlehood during the colonial era was less stigmatized but came with its own set of challenges. Bachelors, particularly those who could not afford dowries or belonged to lower castes, faced societal judgment as unfulfilled members of society. They were often seen as economic liabilities if they did not contribute to family wealth or lineage. However, single men were granted more personal freedom than women, and their unmarried status was rarely seen as a moral failing.

Post-independence period: Continuities and changes

After India's independence in 1947, India saw incremental shifts in the condition of single individuals. The Constitution enshrined principles of equality, offering a foundation for improving the rights of women. Social reform movements gained momentum, addressing issues like child marriage, widowhood, and education for women. By the mid-20th century, women began entering the workforce in larger numbers, offering them a degree of financial independence.

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The evolution of societal attitudes toward single people in India, spanning from the colonial period to the end of the 20th century, reveals a story of shifting expectations, societal transformations, constraints, and opportunities for both men and women. While singlehood in this context primarily stems from widows, spinsters, bachelors, and individuals choosing to remain unmarried, the societal pressures and realities they faced were deeply gendered and shaped by cultural history. However, single women continued to face societal scrutiny, with spinsters viewed as incomplete and widows still burdened by age-old superstitions. Men, in contrast, were often seen as 'eligible bachelors', particularly if they were professionally successful, reflecting the persistent double standards around gender and singlehood.

The latter half of the 20th century brought significant changes, driven by urbanization, education, and economic liberalization. Single men and women began finding spaces in cities where they could live outside the traditional family structure. The stigma surrounding single women remained, particularly in rural areas, where patriarchal norms were deeply entrenched as part of cultural history. For women, this era also saw the rise of figures who defied societal expectations—women who chose to remain unmarried to support their families or pursue careers, such as Anita Desai's Bim in *Clear Light of Day.* This Bimla is an excellent representation of the post-independence Indian woman who became the 'man of the house', sacrificed her personal life for the sake of family and, in many ways, became the emotional and practical backbone of her household. Bim is one of those women who quietly slips into the role of caretaker, guardian, and surrogate patriarch without any fanfare, and her sacrifices are often overlooked by the very family she strives to hold together. Bim's life is a portrait of sacrifice and duty. While her siblings, like Tara, forge lives of their own—Tara marries and moves away—Bim remains tethered to the family home, shouldering the responsibility of the disabled brother and of his emotional and financial stability. She becomes the 'man of the house', not out of ambition but by default, as no one else steps up. Her sacrifices are perceived as noble by some, burdensome by others, but regardless, her personal desires and romantic aspirations are continually sidelined in favor of familial obligations.

While she exudes strength outwardly, Bim is deeply conflicted internally. The resentment of sacrificing her ambitions and happiness for her family's sake weighs heavily on her, especially as she observes her other siblings living a freer, more independent life. She is torn between the resentment and agony of her insecure future, echoing the same question, 'who will look after her in her old days?'. Sarah Lamb answers that in her book,

> "The book argues that an easily overlooked feature of Indian patrilineal kinship systems that makes being single so challenging for women is that women have essentially no

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> secure kinship without marriage—and in India, secure kinship is crucial for life. Such kinship precarity plays out in various ways. First, some women do not marry because they want to support their natal kin—but, even if they make that choice, their brothers often feel no obligation to reciprocate the support. Further, few non-family housing alternatives can be found, especially for unattached women beyond the most elite. In addition, despite the current popularity of solo living in places like North America and Europe, living singly is not a familiar or desirable way of being for most people in India. Unless one can land a secure, well-paying job, supporting oneself economically while single is also challenging. Similarly, in a society where taken-for-granted visions see old age as a time for naturally needing, deserving, and enjoying care from kin, single women with tenuous kin connections and no children can feel particularly vulnerable." (Lamb, 5)

Bim's story coincides with the experiences of many post-independence Indian women, trapped in roles demanding relentless selflessness due to societal and familial pressures. Another such instance is echoed in Lamb's case study.

> "Nayani takes care of the finances for the family. They come to her for money when they are in need. "That was another reason for my not marrying," Nayani explained. "I had to take care of people in the family. My sisters were not married, and I needed to get them married." She had used her domestic-servant salary to pay for their wedding expenses and dowries. "I needed also to take care of the elderly people [in my employer's family]. If I got married, I wouldn't be able to take care of them all." This—a daughter's and sister's care—is a central theme of chapter 3, how first-employed sisters in struggling families forego marriage as a way to support their own natal kin." (Lamb, 23)

Her role embodies the invisible emotional labor expected of women—quietly holding families together while suppressing their own struggles. Just like Bim, she is both the savior and the prisoner of her circumstances, an enduring symbol of resilience and unacknowledged sacrifice, reflective of countless women whose personal dreams are eclipsed by the weight of familial duty.

> "Either older and/or single women who are unmarried, widowed, or dependent are called in to step in. And if that is not available then this domestic labour is shifted to women from marginalized classes and castes. So labour remains gendered, just that some women are free of it because other women have taken it over as employment, often with bad working conditions, poor pay, and not enough respect."(Shah, 80)

For men, singlehood became less stigmatized as the emphasis on financial self-sufficiency grew. The concept of a 'confirmed bachelor' gained a somewhat romanticized image in urban settings, reflecting a growing acceptance of alternative lifestyles.(Madden, 2019) By the 1990s, single individuals began forming communities—groups of friends or peers who supported each other in the absence of traditional family structures. While progress was evident by the end of the 20th century, societal attitudes still lagged behind. Single women were often stereotyped as lonely or pitiable, while single men were occasionally valorized for

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their independence. Nonetheless, the growing visibility of singlehood in both genders marked a significant departure from the harsh realities of the colonial period, setting the stage for further changes in the 21st century.

Redefining solitude in the 21st century

The new-age single woman of this millennium in India (and across the globe) is rewriting the script of what it means to be unmarried, and she's doing it with a level of positivity and defiance that would make her predecessors nod in approval. Single people of the 21st century, as Bella DePaulo describes, are diverse and empowered individuals who embrace singlehood "by choice, circumstance, or at heart." (DePaulo, 2011) They challenge societal norms, prioritize personal growth and independence, and redefine relationships by forming strong friendships and chosen families, proving that fulfillment transcends traditional marital expectations.

These women are choosing a path that steps away from the traditional expectation of marriage as the ultimate fulfillment and embracing a new kind of freedom and empowerment. They are often labeled as 'risking' old-age loneliness by a society still heavily invested in marital status as the ultimate indicator of success. But rather than framing this as a negative, many of these women are redefining what it means to live a full, meaningful life outside of the constraints of marriage. While older generations may have seen marriage as a guarantee of support in old age, many single women today are not afraid of being alone in their later years. They are investing in their emotional well-being, health, and networks, ensuring that they have a strong support system when they grow older. This includes staying active in social circles, participating in community groups, and even planning for their retirement with a focus on independence and sustainability. The fear of loneliness, often a societal imposition, is gradually being replaced by the understanding that the future can be shaped by one's actions today. Many also argue that traditional marriages aren't a guarantee against loneliness—sometimes, it's the unmarried woman with a vibrant social life who has the most fulfilling later years.

Ketaki Chowkhani in her essay "Successfully Aging Alone" describes the single ageing population of India and how 'self-care' saves them. She states,

> "Under the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act 2007, children are required to look after their parents. While this act is undergoing some changes in recent times, it still does not include the role of non-kin in later life caregiving. The law, hence, does not recognize single people's existence in old age, especially those who are never married and without children. Even legal heirs are not bound by the law to look after their guardians.

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> Unlike elsewhere, the age of retirement in India is 60 years. Hence, those who are single and do not have children to look after them need to start planning for their old age sooner than those who have children, often from the ages of 40 and 50 onward. This demographic needs to already plan successfully aging alone, especially because they don't have children to look after them, which renders them non-existent in the face of the law. Legally, they do not have "anyone" to look after them since they do not have children, but as I shall demonstrate, they socially have mobilized a network of support to counter the gaps in the law." (Chowkhani, 145)

Beyond blood: Community and companionship

The single people community, combating ageism and redefining what 'family' means, is not just a trend—it's a revolution. Through new models of companionship, friendship-based families, and startups like *Goodfellow*, single people are finding ways to thrive, reject loneliness, and live with dignity. The old narrative of aging as a time for solitude is being replaced by one where community, connection, and support flourish outside of marriage.

> "Sehgal(2012)writes in her last chapter that embracing survival is always as painful as it is pleasurable. As we try to encounter the rhythms of life and death in the process of ageing, it is important to start conversing in what contexts will "we" (my generation) be ageing – how shall we talk about caring in situations of singleness, childless adults, and non-married cohabiting adults and create communities of companionships?" (Sen, 46)

Mahesh Elkunchwar's *Sonata* (2001) presents a powerful portrayal of single women combating loneliness and ageism by forming a chosen family. The play revolves around three middle-aged, unmarried friends—Aruna, a traditional academic; Dolon, a lively banker; and Subhadra, a rebellious journalist—who find solace in each other's company within the walls of their shared urban space and forge a bond that is entirely independent of marriage. Through laughter, arguments, and shared vulnerability, they challenge societal norms and show that companionship doesn't have to stem from traditional family structures; rather the trio's bond becomes their chosen family—a family that chooses them back. They don't rely on children or partners to fill the gaps left by societal expectations. In this narrative, the women laugh together, cry together, and grow old together. By supporting each other emotionally and defying the stigma of being single and aging, they redefine community, proving that friendship can be a sanctuary against societal judgment.

This shift is particularly important in a society like India, where the pressure to get married and have children is still pervasive, especially for women. Being single, especially as one grows older, can be seen as 'unnatural' or 'tragic,' with a heavy dose of ageism thrown in. Society often assumes that single people in their

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twilight years must be desperate for companionship or simply waiting for the inevitable loneliness that will accompany old age. But through movies like *Sonata*, challenging ageist assumptions, illustrates how friendship and a close-knit group can become a robust alternative to the traditional family structure, and singlehood does not have to be synonymous with loneliness.

> "It is those who, irrespective of their own specific desire, are willing to challenge norms of society that we look towards to see how new caring patterns can emerge: those, who do not think that all relationships have to be monogamous or long term and try living polygamously making their rules as they go along; those who are not in relationships at all because that is how they cherish their lives or make committed intimacies independent of sexual desire; those who are single by choice or because they have not found anyone to share their life with or are so because a commitment they made did not last and are not looking but are also not averse; those who care for many young people with full responsibility without actually being parents; and even those who adopt children with many others and bring to parenting the joys of shared concern but also do not see these children as their investment for an old age." (Shah, 84)

India's aging population, many of whom are single, widowed, or living alone. The concept of 'companionship' here goes beyond traditional caregiving—it's a model that emphasizes human connection, shared interests, and the joy of spending time with someone who values your company. Santanu Naidu's mission *The Goodfellows* is to offer dignity, respect, and much-needed companionship to individuals who are often pushed aside in society's rush towards coupledom and family-based success. By creating a platform where older, often single individuals can find meaningful human connections, *The Goodfellows* is addressing ageism head-on. It doesn't just offer the prospect of 'services' but creates a sense of belonging for people who have long been excluded from the 'family unit'. It allows single people, particularly those in their later years, to experience a fulfilling, connected life without the societal assumption that they need to 'settle down' to be happy.

The Goodfellows also does something incredibly important—it challenges the stereotype that aging people are burdensome or need to be cared for in a paternalistic manner. Instead, it offers a way for them to retain their autonomy, dignity, and social connectedness. Through companionship and conversations, single people don't just survive—they thrive, making it a model that could work for the wider community, especially in combating ageism and loneliness. This growing trend signals a societal shift, where people are starting to value emotional connections over conventional family structures. Younger generations, particularly millennials and Gen Z, are less likely to view marriage as the ultimate goal. This opens the door for friendships, peer groups, and even new types of communal living to flourish. These groups are not just about reducing loneliness—they also serve as a powerful statement against the pervasive ageism that

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assumes people, particularly those without children or partners, are somehow 'incomplete'.

> "The need to be cared for in ageing and infirmity comes as a possibility for all – queer people, single folks, married heterosexual heteronormative, and even non-normative heterosexual couples all could be requiring care in varying degrees. There is no infallible mechanism to ensure care even if one swears by heteronormativity or remains surrounded by a train of relatives. Care cannot become the assured dividend to be collected in posterity by investing in marriage (and progeny) in youth. Aged care practices will need to be built collaboratively with affective relationalities that defy the logic of conjugality and blood kinship. Living in perpetual polyamory, in rhizomatic clusters and knots, these relationalities can be imagined to find root in both, families and communities, not through any necessary lineage of entitlements but in being gingerly woven through care and justice." (Biswas, 98)

Intersecting margins: Queerness, age, and isolation

This further opens another avenue of discussion. For queer individuals, singlehood intersects with ageism in unique ways. Older queer individuals often face complex and challenging experiences, compounded with discrimination and invisibility, due to their sexual orientation and age. Queer individuals, especially those who are older, can face unique struggles when it comes to relationships, social support, and recognition in both the queer community and broader society. (Bakshi, 2024) In the colonial era, queerness was not openly acknowledged or accepted, and single women who did not conform to heteronormative expectations were often stigmatized as 'spinsters' or 'eccentric.' Their single status was both a shield and a source of vulnerability, allowing them to evade heteronormative marital roles but exposing them to social ostracism.

In contemporary society, the challenges faced by older queer singles are multifaceted. While there is greater acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities, older queer individuals often lack the familial support systems that can mitigate the effects of ageism. Chosen families—a cornerstone of queer communities—may not always endure into old age, leaving many without a reliable network for caregiving or companionship. Additionally, the lack of queer-affirming spaces in elder care facilities and retirement communities perpetuates feelings of exclusion and invisibility.

> "For ageing, single queer people, in particular, it is a bigger challenge, given they often have to deal with bitter rejection on dating sites, notwithstanding the fact that ageing people are sexually desirable to many. Even if romance arrives, sometimes, it comes with a heavy penalty to be paid later – of being financially blackmailed, conned, and

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> even murdered. Cat-fishing is rampant on gay dating sites in India, where older men, particularly those who are well-established, are targeted very often."(Bakshi, 58)

Ageism can be especially problematic when it comes to accessing healthcare. Older queer individuals, particularly those who have been single for long periods, may lack access to intimate partners or family members who can advocate for them in medical or caregiving settings. This makes them more vulnerable to neglect or miscommunication in healthcare, where professionals may not fully understand or respect their needs. There may also be an added layer of discomfort or discrimination from healthcare providers who are not familiar with or sensitive to the specific health issues faced by queer individuals.

For queer single individuals who are older, these health concerns are compounded by both ageism and heteronormative biases, which can lead to neglect in areas such as mental health, sexual health, and overall well-being. Older queer people may face challenges finding age-appropriate resources or practitioners who understand the intersection of their identities. They may also experience erasure in discussions about LGBTQ+ healthcare, as younger generations are often the focal point of such conversations.

> "A couple of us shared concrete plans to get into an oldage home at some opportune moment in life. Some of us spoke of our dream of building a single women's commune where queer-identified women would spend their hypermature days. Of course we debated and ranted about "gate keeping" and the norms of entry to the commune, if at all. Notwithstanding the intricacies of that debate, two thoughts took hold of us. The first was a conviction: we were not looking to our natal/marital families for sustenance even if we were surrounded by loving daughters, nephews, nieces, and cousins. We were quite certain that we would spend the latter part of our lives, whatever its duration and substance, in the midst of like-minded, like-spirited, and like-missioned people. The second was a question: Do we buy care or do we build care? Buying care appeared an easier and less complicated choice given our socio-economic profile – saving up and investing in a good oldage home or if one wished to stay "independent" then save up enough for the medical bills and paid caregiving. But then, given our political zeal, buying care seemed a less challenging option. Building care was where we seemed to arrive. Our hopelessly political beings refused to give up on the dream of what we called a queer commune – a collective living arrangement where members live in a kinship forged outside and beyond filial ties and with the intention of sharing resources and responsibilities. In other words, we envisioned our ageing to be in a living arrangement made possible through queer care practices that does not rely on intergenerational kinships5 but builds itself up on affective relationalities. The queer community has had to grapple with the common perception that they are doomed to lives of loneliness and despair in their old age by virtue of falling (staying) outside the "safety" net of heteronormative marriage, family, and kinship. In this context, making a digression from the age-old question, "What does ageing do to queer lives?" let us ask, what does queer lives do to ageing? This piece is an attempt to talk of queer living as a starting point to imagine different ethics of care and affective relationalities that suggests an

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alternative to given structures of aged care practices, not just for queer lives, but, and also, for heterosexual lives." (Biswas, 90)

Singlehood often includes disabled individuals who, due to societal biases and structural barriers, are unable to marry and find themselves part of this marginalized group. Eldercare issues, their mental health, well-being, housing policies, retirement plans, social support systems, and so on are becoming important issues for government and society.These social challenges are increasingly becoming catalysts for innovation and entrepreneurship in India's evolving economy. As societal norms shift and the number of single individuals and aging citizens grows, businesses are identifying opportunities to cater to their unique needs. These new market-driven enterprises are not only addressing the gaps in caregiving, companionship, and housing but also redefining how India views singlehood and aging.

"Gangopadhyay (2021) examines how the market is stepping in to provide medical care, especially in the form of self-care in the context of older married people in urban India. She notes that older adults, all of whom are or were married, and have children, and especially those who live alone, are relying on the market rather than the family for self-care and successfully aging alone. Their attachments and reliance are shifting from family to the market, which creates a new form of aging." (Chowkhani, 146)

Singles are combating ageism with self-care by prioritizing their mental, physical, and emotional well-being. They are embracing fitness routines, mindfulness practices, and hobbies to stay healthy and active as they age. Many invest in therapy or mental health support to navigate loneliness and societal pressures, while others build strong peer networks for mutual support. Financial independence and long-term planning, including retirement funds and health insurance, are also key strategies. "Solitude and introversion apart, some chronic patients were also able to exercise their agency to evolve their own self-care strategies." (Chowkhani, 150)

One of the most significant impacts has been in the companionship and caregiving sector. Startups like *Helpage India, The Goodfellows, SeniorWorld, Emoha, GenWise, 60Plus India, Alserv, ElderAid Wellness* have emerged. By providing paid companionship to elderly individuals, many of whom are single or widowed, enterprises like this combine emotional support with practical help. This model has created a new segment in India's service industry, where human connection and empathy are monetized but delivered with dignity. Such initiatives are not merely businesses; they are lifelines for older adults who lack family support in an increasingly nuclear-family-centric society. To combat the loneliness often associated with aging, dating sites like *OurTime, SilverSingles, and SeniorMatchcater* are catering to senior demographics, offering user-friendly interfaces and meaningful connection opportunities.

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> "Gangopadhyay (2020) points out that increasingly older people prefer living on their own rather than with her children, or in institutional arrangements. Her findings suggest a change in filial ties, with elders relying more on domestic help, shopkeepers, and drivers rather than on their families. Unlike the older people in Gangopadhyay's study, life-long single people in my study have developed a different network which comprises of friends, chosen family, siblings, doctors, and work colleagues. This difference can be attributed to the fact that long-term singles are more likely to form support networks outside the family (DePaulo, 2006; Klinenberg, 2012)." (Gangopadhyay, 2021)

Government policies related to ageism in India, such as the National Policy on Older Persons (1999) and the Maintenance and Welfare of Parents and Senior Citizens Act (2007), aim to address the needs of the elderly. However, these policies often fall short in addressing the unique challenges faced by single, marginalized individuals, especially queer and unmarried people. The focus remains largely on family-based caregiving, which fails to consider those without traditional family structures. Additionally, there is limited recognition of the intersectionality between ageism, singlehood, and marginalization, leaving many individuals without adequate support or legal protection.

Conclusion

This paper posits that the intersection of singlehood and ageism is a global phenomenon, but its impact is particularly intense in India due to deeply rooted cultural norms that emphasize marriage, family, and filial responsibility. In India, being single—especially at an older age—often leads to social stigma, economic insecurity, and limited access to care, magnified by ageist attitudes that devalue older adults without traditional family roles. However, this issue is also significant in many other countries, especially where societal expectations prioritize family-based support for the elderly. Western nations, for example, are witnessing rising concerns about loneliness and inadequate care among aging singles, though often within different social frameworks and welfare systems (Lamb, 2018; Victor et al., 2020).

Across these narratives, aged single individuals are seen drawing social support from diverse sources such as friends, doctors, workplaces, siblings, and chosen families. While many maintain connections with their natal families, their primary sources of physical and emotional support often lie beyond traditional systems. A distinctive aspect of single people's support, particularly during the lockdown, is their reliance on solitude. They frequently turn to themselves first before seeking help from others (DePaulo, 2011). Their approach to self-care as they age combines two key strategies: embracing solitude and fostering social networks. Ketaki therefore argues,

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> "Elsewhere I have argued that a singlehood standpoint is a return to the self. Singlehood offers us productive solitude, returns to the self within as well as a connection to communities. In their strategies of self-care, older single people who are living alone are using both strategies of turning inward and outward to deal with chronic illness and maintain health and well-being. They are turning within to heal themselves from negative emotions, bad health and to experience joy, and they are turning outward for advice and help and socialization. Most of their self-care as they grow older comes not from mandates of the law, but from practices of singlehood that they are already equipped with, and which they have been using for a few decades." (Chowkhani, 152)

This chapter has focused specifically on the experiences of single women to highlight how gendered expectations have shaped their lives across historical periods—from the precolonial era to the 21st century. While ageism affects all individuals, single women have faced a unique and layered form of marginalization due to the deeply entrenched norms of patriarchal society. The transition from revered figures in certain pre colonial contexts to stigmatized and invisible identities in colonial and postcolonial frameworks reflects the evolving yet restrictive constructs of femininity and respectability.

Choosing women as the focal point allows for a more vivid and nuanced exploration of how singlehood intersects with age, autonomy, and societal perception. Although single men are not immune to age-related biases, their experiences are often shaped differently and less visibly by social expectations. The rich and complex narratives of single women thus serve as a compelling case study for understanding ageism in gendered terms. However, the experiences of single men remain an important area for further exploration and present a critical research gap that future studies could address to develop a more comprehensive understanding of ageism and singlehood across the gender spectrum.

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Chapter Five. *"When Good Individuals Like Myself Are All Alone"* – Problems and Challenges of the Phenomenon of the Inceldom

Abstract
This chapter presents the main problems and challenges related to inceldom, as described in the current literature. It reviews the definitions of inceldom and tools used to operationalize inceldom in studies. It also highlights the link between inceldom and violence. This link is really complex—on the one hand, violent content is a frequent occurrence in the manosphere; on the other hand, there is some evidence that most self-identified incels do not approve of violence. We also reviewed the empirical evidence concerning mental health problems in incels, including high rates of depression and suicidal ideations. We also highlighted the phenomenon of inceldom among other groups than cisgender, white, heterosexual men, namely, women, LGBT+ people, and people of color. We also highlighted the implications of inceldom for mental health professionals, including the potentially detrimental effects of spending too much time in the manosphere on the clients' mental health, the techniques that may be useful in working with dysfunctional beliefs related to inceldom, as well as the possibility to overcome the resistance against professional help, which is a frequent problem among self-identified incels.
Keywords: Incels; Inceldom; blackpill; redpill; manosphere

Introduction

Incels (a portmanteau of *involuntary celibate*) are *a sub-culture community of men who forge a sense of identity around their perceived inability to form sexual or romantic relationships* (Whittaker et al., 2024, p. 4). The phenomenon of inceldom among men has gained traction after Elliot Rodger, on 23rd May 2014, killed six people and injured fourteen others during a killing spree in Isla Vista (California, US) and then took his own life. When explaining his motive in a document that he diffused before the attack, he blamed the women who had rejected him. However, the link between inceldom and violence is complex and nuanced, and some incels pose more threat for themselves than for society. In this chapter we aim at reviewing the scientific evidence concerning the problems and challenges posed by inceldom to society.

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Incels connect mainly online, within the manosphere, defined as *a decentralized network of websites, gaming platforms, and chatrooms imbued with a heavy sense of misogyny and significant overlap with other violent ideologies, including but not limited to, right-wing extremism and white supremacy* (Clarke & Turner, 2020). One of the problems frequently emerging in the manosphere is loneliness.

The terms 'incel' and 'inceldom' refer to a fundamentally cultural phenomenon and, as such, warrant two separate analytic approaches: emic and etic (Pike, 1954). The former attempts to give an account of a subculture from an insider's point of view, operating on its beliefs as they are experienced and understood by the group adherents. The latter interprets the subculture's lore from the perspective of a scientific observer, attempting to draw parallels between different subcultures (Jorion, 1983). In the case of the incels, an emic approach would analyze their worldview and grievances as formulated by them, crediting their stated motifs and intentions (e.g., Patterson-Sterling, 2024). On the other hand, an etic approach would (ideally) catalog their behaviors, uncover the psychological drivers and functions thereof, and make cross-cultural comparisons. Both perspectives are represented in the literature, albeit not usually explicitly acknowledged.

Regarding the question of who may count as an 'incel,' an emic framework limits the answer to individuals having frequented or contributed to the manosphere (e.g., Ellenberg et al., 2024; Gosse et al., 2024). An etic framework will try to define a criterion, the fulfilling of which would automatically identify a given person as an incel, even if that person lived in a different period or a non-Western culture or has neither self-identified as an incel nor even referenced the ideology. For instance, Czykwin (2019) associates Anders Breivik with the incel ideology. The Anti-Defamation League, an American NGO, similarly classifies as "Incel Backgrounder" perpetrators who operated before the movement came into being (Whittaker et al., 2024, p. 6). Some scholars believe this to be erroneous (for a discussion, see Czerwinsky, 2024). Interestingly, some studies leave it up to the members themselves to determine what constellation of circumstances constitutes 'inceldom' (which is done by collecting data from a survey), thereby mixing the two approaches (e.g. Speckhard et al., 2021).

Involuntary celibacy had been studied long before the movement in question emerged. In rural Japan, the problem of attracting brides by men predates the 1970s (Knight, 1995). Indeed some of the reasons given by Knight (1995) for its existence are reminiscent of incels' convictions—e.g., the exercise of the choice not to marry by women, the affording of extramarital self-fulfillment possibilities for women by the modern culture—but the author paints a more nuanced picture than that. It has been theorized since at least the 1950s that the loss of heterosexual contact opportunities in imprisoned men constitutes a threat to

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their masculinity, for which they try to compensate by making women and homosexual men subordinate to them (Newton, 1994). A study, which might very well have been the first-ever study of incels—then a non-extremist, free from hate speech, sexually heterogeneous collection of netizens—took place online between 1998 and 2000, not long after the creation of the original support website. It delineated three groups of involuntary celibates: the 'virgins' (no relationship or sexual experience), 'singles' (not currently partnered but with past sexual experience), and 'partnered-s' (currently partnered and with past sexual experience but currently sexually inactive). The results of the study are manifold; however, desiring to be wanted and loved, feeling off-time or left behind by peers, body image, and emotional problems were among the most prominent motifs in the 'virgins' group, which bears the most resemblance to today's incels (Donnelly et al., 2001).

No single comprehensive definition of 'inceldom' has ever been posited; considering the group's heterogeneity, this might pose a feckless or counterproductive endeavor (Czerwinsky, 2024; Moonshot CVE, 2021). One of the first drafts of a description of inceldom was a post on *Alana's Involuntary Celibacy Project*—the online space that eventually became the forerunner of the modern movement—which included both married and unmarried individuals and listed the following as qualities constitutive of inceldom: not currently dating but wants to; has never been in a relationship; has difficulty meeting sexual partners; has inadequate experience; sexually inactive in a relationship and unhappy about it (Boltwood, 1999). Alongside those, the poster outlined possible problems, such as the age at which inceldom can be determined in an individual or how long celibacy has to last to become inceldom. According to a recent study (Speckhard et al., 2021), almost 95% of self-identified incels endorse the *blackpill* ideology, which presents inceldom as an immutable state, resulting from the current societal order in which women are no longer subordinate to men and thus physically unattractive and low-status men are condemned to be incels. *Blackpill* is an offshoot of the concept of *redpill*, a term derived from the "Matrix" movie, which means confrontation with reality, contrary to *bluepill*, which means living in delusion. In the context of the incel ideology, a *bluepilled person* engages in conventional courtship behaviors, and believes personality, intimacy, and emotional connection to be as important as physical attractiveness or socioeconomic status in dating; they do not subscribe to the incels' belief system. Redpilled individuals, on the other hand, believe the modern society and its dating market to be fundamentally skewed against men and affording women undue privileges. The system, in their view, can nevertheless be gamed by the men to their advantage, contrary to what the blackpill adherents believe.

Naturally, in the wake of the incel-motivated violent attacks (e.g., the mass shooting in Isla Vista in 2014), researchers started including in their descriptions

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the qualities of portraying oneself as a victim of female unavailability, hatred for women, proclivity towards retaliation, and violence (e. g., Katz & Tirone, 2015) or entitlement to intercourse (Gosse et al., 2024; Utterback, 2024). Some studies incorporate elements of the network of incel notions; an extensive account of the incel worldview can be found in (Andersen, 2023).

In order to facilitate quantitative research on incels, several scales for measuring the level of congruence between an individual's beliefs and the incel ideology (i. e. quantitatively operationalizing the 'inceldom' variable) have been put forth:

- Incel Trait Scale—prepared based on media reports for the search term "incel movement" in Google News, which often used the shooters' and incels' own words (Scaptura & Boyle, 2020).
- Incel Indoctrination Rubric (Van Brunt & Taylor, 2021)—a tool for assessing how much an individual has been indoctrinated into the ideology of incels; it operates on the following domains: Thinking, Feeling, Behavior, and Environmental Factors.
- Incel Ideology Scale and Incel Radicalization Scale (Moskalenko et al., 2022a, 2022b)—the former measures endorsement of the *blackpill* ideology, the latter—endorsement of incel violence.
- Redpill-Blackpill Scale (Walczak et al., 2024)—a two-factor scale measuring the endorsement of the *redpill* and the *blackpill* ideology.

Of note is also an attempt by Grunau et al. (2022) to conceptualize involuntary celibacy (dubbed 'Unwanted Celibacy Scale' for distinction) irrespective of inceldom, presupposing that there exist individuals with dissatisfactory sex life who nevertheless do not subscribe to the incel ideology (its 12 items pertain, inter alia, to dating, rejection, attractiveness, sex, comparison to others). Indeed, researchers are now tapping into a growing group of ex-incels who nevertheless remain involuntarily celibate, further highlighting the difference (Smith et al., 2024).

Inceldom and violence

The phenomenon of inceldom among men has gained traction after the killing spree in Isla Vista in 2014, perpetrated by Elliot Rodger. Some perpetrators of other killing sprees explicitly declared that Rodger inspired them, e. g., Nikolas Cruz, who, on 14th February 2018 in Parkland (Florida, US), shot 17 persons and injured 17 others (Bates, 2020). The incel perpetrators of high-profile killing sprees are glorified by other incels, e. g., Elliot Rodger is hailed as a hero, a martyr, a prophet, and even a saint (Baele et al., 2021; Bates, 2020). When on 24th

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February 2020, a young man in Toronto, inspired by incel ideology, stabbed a 24-year-old woman, Ashley Noell Arzaga, with a machete, Canadian police classified his crime as terrorist activity (Cecco, 2020). Also, in 2020, the Texas Department of Public Safety (2020, p. 3) classified incels as "an emerging domestic terrorism threat." Does it mean that inceldom is inherently related to violence?

On the one hand, there is some evidence, primarily based on qualitative studies, that Incel communities on the internet justify sexual violence. Gosse et al. (2024), in their qualitative analysis of more than 20,000 comments on the largest English language incel forum, incels.is, point out three main aspects of normalizing violence against women by incels. First, they demonstrate that justification of violence against women is deeply rooted in incels' perception of the relationships between men and women, where women are explicitly dehumanized, e. g., by being referred to as "foids" (a portmanteau of *female humanoid*) "holes" and "cum buckets." Second, incels justify violence as a form of revenge on women for refusing them sex to which they feel entitled, e. g., one of the incels.is users explicitly stated that women deserve mass rapes and murder as a punishment for putting men into inceldom. Third, incels misuse genetics and evolutionary psychology in order to demonstrate that violence is an inherent part of the relationships between men and women, e. g., by spreading the myth that women enjoy being raped. Disseminating such violent content may be encouraged by the online disinhibition effect—the anonymity on the internet makes people less inhibited towards breaching social norms, e. g., by using hate speech (Suler, 2004; Williams et al., 2021). Ellenberg et al. (2024) also point out that the perpetrators of inceldom-motivated mass violence acts are glorified in the incel communities (see, e. g., Baele et al., 2021; Bates, 2020), which may lead other incels to believe that violence is an effective way for gaining respect and admiration.

Moreover, a quantitative study by Grunau et al. (2022) demonstrated that unwanted celibacy is positively correlated with misogynist attitudes, including rape myth acceptance, even after controlling for personality traits, e. g., agreeableness. Rape myths are beliefs that aim at downplaying or justifying sexual violence, e. g., the belief that when a woman invites a man to her house, it implies that she wants to have sex with him (Gerger et al., 2007). We must not ignore the link between unwanted celibacy and rape myth acceptance, especially considering that rape myth acceptance is a risk factor for perpetrating sexual violence (Yapp & Quayle, 2018). High rejection sensitivity among incels, compared to non-incels (Sparks et al., 2024b) also plays a role here. Romantic rejection is a risk factor for aggressive behavior, especially among people with a high level of rejection sensitivity (Andrighetto et al., 2019; Blake et al., 2018; Downey et al., 2000; Romero-Canyas et al., 2010), social dominance orientation, i. e. a belief that social inequalities are an inherent part of the functioning of society (Kelly et al.,

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2015), sexual dominance motivation, i.e. perception of sex as a mean for dominating another person (Woerner et al., 2018), and positive attitudes toward casual sex (Woerner et al., 2018). In extreme cases, rejection may even lead to homicide (Wilson & Daly, 1993).

On the other hand, studies conducted among self-identified incels demonstrate that most of them disapprove of violence (Moskalenko et al., 2022a; Speckhard et al., 2021; Whittaker et al., 2024). Jaki et al. (2019), who analyzed 50,000 messages on the incel.me forum, demonstrated that an overwhelming majority of hateful content is generated by 10% of users. Perliger et al. (2023), who analyzed more than 12,000 messages on incel forums, demonstrated that only 1.39% of messages could be classified as legitimizing violence. We should also take into account that radical beliefs predict only a tiny fraction of radical actions (Moskalenko, 2021; Moskalenko et al., 2022a) and that on the internet, people often create personas that differ from their daily functioning (Blumer & Döring, 2012; Daly & Nichols, 2024). Thus, we can assume that not all people who spread violent content through the manosphere are inclined to engage in violent behavior. Moreover, 13.6% of incels reported some willingness to rape if they could get away with it, which may seem a high rate but is in fact, counterintuitively, lower than the rate among men from the general population where this rate ranges from 20% to even 35% (Costello & Buss, 2023).

As can be seen, the link between inceldom and violence is complex. Moskalenko et al. (2022a) demonstrated that radicalization among incels is predicted by depressive symptoms, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and the experience of bullying. Although there is no direct link between ASD and violent behavior, there is some evidence that one of the risk factors for violent behavior among people with ASD is sexual frustration (Bjørkly, 2009; Im, 2016). Thus, it is probable that an interaction of ASD and inceldom may increase the risk of violent behavior. The finding concerning the link between depression and radicalization is consistent with previous studies conducted on other groups (Bhui et al., 2014, 2016; Misiak et al., 2019; Victoroff et al., 2011). Whittaker et al. (2024) demonstrated that justification of violence among incels is predicted by depression, anxiety, displaced aggression, angry rumination, contact with other incels, and right-wing political views.

Carian et al. (2024) emphasize that the primary cause of incel violence is male supremacist ideology, not problems with mental health. Nevertheless, the abovementioned link between depression and radicalization (Bhui et al., 2014, 2016; Misiak et al., 2019; Moskalenko et al., 2022a; Victoroff et al., 2011) is consistent with the frustration-aggression theory, according to which aggression results from experiencing frustration (Berkowitz, 1989; Dollard et al., 1944; Kruglanski et al., 2023). This suggests that in order to prevent incel violence, it is necessary to take into account the incels' mental health.

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Inceldom and well-being

There is a subgroup of incels who self-identify as 'mentalcels,' a type of incel that attributes their inceldom to poor mental health (Jaki et al., 2019). Indeed, there is some evidence for the link between inceldom and mental health problems, like depressive symptoms and anxiety (Anti-Defamation League, 2020, Ciocca et al., 2022; Costello et al., 2022; Delaney et al., 2024; Fontanesi et al., 2024; SergeantIncel, 2019, as cited in: Stijelja & Mishara, 2023; Sparks et al., 2024a, 2024b; Speckhard et al., 2021; see also: Broyd et al., 2023, for a review). In a study by Moskalenko et al. (2022a), conducted among 274 self-identified incels, 95% reported depression symptoms and 94%—anxiety symptoms, which is approximately three times higher than the rates found in the general population. Whittaker, et al. (2024) demonstrated that a significant proportion of incels (39%) meet the criteria for moderate depression, with 43% reporting symptoms of anxiety. Moreover, almost a half of self-identified incels who participated in the study conducted by Speckhard et al. (2021) declared having experienced suicidal ideations. A survey conducted by Incels.co (as cited in: Costello et al., 2022) yields even a more alarming result—it indicated that even 82.3% of incels reported to have considered suicide. Speckhard and Ellenberg (2022) found that self-identified incels had a higher prevalence of formal psychological diagnoses compared to the general population, reinforcing the notion that mental health struggles are disproportionately prevalent in this group.

There is also a link between inceldom and autistic traits. Although ASD is a pervasive developmental disorder, not a mental disorder, it may also decrease the level of well-being, considering that it is associated with difficulties in forming romantic and sexual relationships, which may exacerbate feelings of isolation and rejection within the incel community (Williams et al., 2021). There is some evidence for a high prevalence of autistic traits among self-identified incels (Anti-Defamation League, 2020; SergeantIncel, 2019, as cited in: Stijelja & Mishara, 2023; Speckhard et al., 2021).

Speckhard and Ellenberg (2022) point out that some aforementioned problems (e.g. depression) may result from experiencing loneliness and rejection, whereas others (e.g. autism spectrum disorder) are antecedent to inceldom. The link between depressive symptoms and inceldom may be explained with a higher level of loneliness among incels compared to non-incels (Costello et al., 2022). As we mentioned before, there is a lot of evidence for a link between depression and loneliness (Beutel et al., 2017; Domènech-Abella et al., 2019; Donovan et al., 2017; Jaremka et al., 2013; Loades et al., 2020; Mann et al., 2022; McClelland et al., 2020). Most of the studies concerning this problem are cross-sectional, however, a longitudinal analysis conducted by de Maio Nascimento et al. (2024) demonstrated that the link between depression and loneliness among men is bidirec-

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tional. Thus, we should take into account inceldom both as a possible risk factor and a possible consequence of mental health problems.

Apart from the aforementioned disorders there are some problems whose prevalence among incels should be studied in the future—e.g. personality disorders, neurodevelopmental disorders other than autism (e.g. ADHD), psychotic disorders or eating disorders. There are notable parallels between incels and individuals with eating disorders. Both groups exhibit dichotomous thinking. Incels see the social world in terms of clear-cut "us vs. them" distinction—they label themselves as "good decent men", while the "Chads" (physically attractive, sexually successful men) and women attracted to them as mean and depraved (Vito et al., 2017). Patients with eating disorders often believe that they can either be perfect or a complete failure (Byrne et al., 2008). This black-and-white thinking reflects an unhealthy preoccupation with physical appearance, which is a key driver of feelings of worthlessness among incels as well. Such fixation on their perceived unattractiveness may contribute to their overall poor mental health, which may fuel their social withdrawal. Thus we should also include the symptoms of eating disorders among incels in future studies.

Ellenberg et al. (2024) point out two narratives present in the incel community—the externalizing one, focused on the revenge on women and "Chads," and the internalizing one, focused on suicide as a means of ending the suffering resulting from rejection and loneliness. This dichotomy suggests that some incels may constitute a threat to themselves, not only to other people. Indeed, a significant fraction of incels (20%) report daily suicidal thoughts (Whittaker et al., 2024), with many openly discussing their intentions to harm themselves online (Daly & Laskovsov, 2022). This is supported by findings that indicate a strong relationship between depression and suicidality among incels, with feelings of hopelessness, low mood, and victimhood emerging as common themes in incel-related discourse (Costello et al., 2022; Speckhard et al., 2021; Van Brunt et al., 2021).

Loneliness as a social problem

The World Health Organization (2023) declared that loneliness, conceptualized as a distressing, subjective experience of social isolation and an unmet need for meaningful relationships, is an epidemic. The prevalence of loneliness varies, depending on the country and age, from 2.4% to even 43% (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2017; Perissinotto et al., 2012; Surkalim et al., 2022). Loneliness is associated with depression (Beutel et al., 2017; Domènech-Abella et al., 2019; Donovan et al., 2017; Jaremka et al., 2013; Loades et al., 2020; Mann et al., 2022; McClelland et al., 2020), generalized anxiety (Beutel et al., 2017; Domènech-Abella et al., 2019;

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Loades et al., 2020), suicidal ideation (Beutel et al., 2017; Ernst et al., 2021; McClelland et al., 2020; Roberts et al., 1998; Stickley & Koyanagi, 2016), suicidal behaviors (McClelland et al., 2020; Shaw et al., 2021; Shoib et al., 2023; Stickley & Koyanagi, 2016), self-harm (Shaw et al., 2021; Troya et al., 2019) and poor somatic health (Cené et al., 2022; Heidari Gorji et al., 2019; Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015, 2017; Jaremka et al., 2013; Lazzari & Rabottini, 2022; Leigh-Hunt et al., 2017; Manemann et al., 2018; Qiao et al., 2022; Pantell et al., 2013; Valtorta et al., 2016). There is some evidence that social connection gradually declines and this decline accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ernst et al., 2022; Kannan & Veazie, 2023; Kovacs et al., 2021).

One of the factors contributing to loneliness may be the fact that in many countries the marriage rate declines (Allred, 2019; Palamuleni, 2010; United States Census Bureau, 2022), the average age of marriage is higher than before (Shapiro & Gebreselassie, 2014; United States Census Bureau, 2022) and the divorce rate is on the rise (Statistics Poland, 2022). Indeed, being in a romantic relationship is a protective factor against loneliness (Adamczyk, 2016; Bruce et al., 2019; Kislev, 2022; Łyś & Adamczyk, 2024). Romantic loneliness among singles is elevated mainly when the single status is perceived as involuntary (Adamczyk, 2017). Thus we can assume that incels are in a risk group of romantic loneliness.

Inceldom is related not only to romantic loneliness but to social isolation in a more general way—in a survey conducted among 294 users of the incels.me forum, only 36.7% declared having friends (Jeltsen, 2018; Sparks et al., 2024a). Whittaker et al. (2024), who conducted a study among 561 self-identified incels, demonstrated that 48% of them had a maximum score on the loneliness scale, which is really alarming.

On the margin of the margin: Femcels, gaycels, currycels

The aforementioned studies focus on inceldom among cisgender, heterosexual men, which is ironic considering that the term "incel" has been coined by a bisexual woman and referred to people regardless of their gender (Bydlowska, 2016). However, it is not surprising given that manosphere is primarily focused on the issues concerning the relationships between men and women seen from the men's perspective, such as, the concept of hypergamy among women, or the impact of feminism on the fulfillment of men's sexual needs (Baele et al., 2021). There is also some evidence that singlehood is more jarring for men than for women (Ochnik & Slonim, 2020). Nonetheless, everybody, regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation, can experience unwanted celibacy (Grunau et al., 2022; Kelly et al., 2021). *Trufemcels*, a forum for "femcels" (a portmanteau of *female incels*) on Reddit, had 25,500 users in 2020 (Kay, 2021).

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The users of femcel forums focus on the same problems as male incels—lack of physical attractiveness and disadvantage in the sexual marketplace as a result thereof, loneliness, depression, and suicidal thoughts (Bobo, 2023; Brix Rasmussen, 2023; Hart & Huber, 2023; Johanssen & Kay, 2024; Kay, 2021; Pizzimenti & Penna, 2024). However, male incels often deny women's right to identify as incels, as they assume that a woman can get a man in bed if she really wants to, and thus women who label themselves as "femcels" are just too choosy (Hart & Huber, 2023; Johanssen & Kay, 2024; Kay, 2021; Pizzimenti & Penna, 2024). Some incel forums state that they accept only men, while others have a rule "tits or GTFO [get the fuck out]"—a woman must post a photo of her breast in order to be accepted on the forum (Gosse et al., 2024; Nagle, 2015). Kay (2021) notices that, unlike male inceldom, female inceldom is not considered a societal problem and suggests that this difference reflects the difference between men's and women's social status in general.

LGBT+ people also can experience unwanted celibacy. Wongsomboon et al. (2024) suggest that LGBT+ single people struggle with two sources of exclusion and stigmatization—sexual/gender minority status and singlehood. Nonetheless, they are often derogated and excluded from incel communities. Some of them explicitly restrict the membership to heterosexual men (Gosse et al., 2024). Expressions of homophobia, e.g., calling homosexuality a mental disorder, are rampant on incel forums (Jaki et al., 2019). However, Whittaker et al. (2024) demonstrated that most self-identified incels did not endorse homophobic beliefs. Moreover, on TheRedPill forum on Reddit, there is a thread called *Gay Men vs. Feminism: An Unexpected Ally*, where straight and gay men focus on feminists as their main enemies (Ging, 2019). However, there is an intense backlash against lesbians in the manosphere (Vallerga, 2024).

Also, we should consider that the aforementioned studies were conducted primarily among people from WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic) countries, however, in the sample collected by Whittaker et al. (2024), 42% self-identified incels identified as people of color. Nonetheless, taking into account that more than 60% of the sample endorsed the belief that ethnic minorities are primarily responsible for their own problems, we can expect that people of color may face racist backlash among the incel community. Indeed, some incels explicitly endorse racist worldviews, such as one of the incel-motivated violent offenders who begrudged the Black men, and accused them of stealing the women to whom he felt entitled: *When good individuals like myself are all alone, but wicked black men get the loot, like some sort of vaginal pirate. It's not fair* (Williams et al., 2021, p. 12). There is also evidence that some incels from ethnic minorities attribute their inceldom to their ethnicity, labeling themselves, e.g., as ricecels (East Asian men), currycels (Southeast Asian men), Blackcels, and Arabcels (DeCook & Kelly, 2022).

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Practice implications and conclusions

Carian et al. (2024) suggest that focusing on incels' mental health leads to the legitimization of the incel violence and gives the perpetrators undue sympathy. Kelly et al. (2021) point out that violent ideologies are not mental health issues. Indeed, poor mental health cannot be the only explanation for incel-related violence because other groups who are at a high risk of mental health problems, e.g., LGBT+ people (Marshal et al., 2013), do not justify violence. Kelly et al. (2021) point out that the interventions focusing mainly on incels' suffering may lead to reinforcing their sexual entitlement—the belief that women owe them sex. Taking into account the link between sexual entitlement and sexual aggression (Bouffard, 2010), that would be a really adverse effect.

On the other hand, Tomkinson et al. (2020) point out that securitization of the incels—understood as implementing unconventional measures to surveil, monitor, and control them—may lead to their stigmatization and isolation, which fuels radicalization (see, e.g., Awan, 2012). Isolation may incite them to strengthen their ties with other incels. As Doosje et al. (2016) point out, becoming an extremist group member is a crucial part of the radicalization process. Moskalenko et al. (2022a) indicate that the image of inceldom in media is skewed—media pay disproportionate attention to violence perpetrators, like Rodger and Cruz, whereas most incels do not endorse violence. This skewed image may lead to stigmatization. Thus it is necessary that the media show a complex picture of the incel movement, not only the violent extremists.

Doosje et al. (2016) also point out that resilience is a shield against radicalization. Feddes et al. (2015), who conducted a study among Muslim adolescents and young adults, demonstrated that resilience training increased the participants' empathy and self-esteem and, in turn, decreased their endorsement of ideology-based violence and violent intentions. That suggests that in order to prevent radicalization of incels, it is necessary to help them to strengthen their resilience.

Utterback (2024) argues that only interventions addressing incels' explicitly stated needs, struggles and goals, rather than those imposing outside agendas, have a chance of not being dismissed. Providing incels with psychological support may pose a challenge. First of all, negative attitudes toward psychotherapy (e.g., perceiving it as a "scam") are frequent among incels (Broyd et al., 2023; Speckhard et al., 2021). Speckhard and Ellenberg (2022) point out that some incels are afraid that the therapist may blame them for their inceldom, ignoring the social causes, like "lookism" (a bias against physically unattractive people). Some incels point out that psychotherapy will not help to resolve the root cause of their problems, e.g., physical unattractiveness (Daly & Laskovsov, 2022). Tastenhoye et al. (2023) point out that incels may not label themselves as "incels"

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when talking to a specialist due to the image of incels as violent perpetrators depicted by the media. Therefore, in order to identify the incels among their patients, mental health specialists should know the incel parlance, like, *redpill, blackpill,* and *Chad.*

If the specialist realizes that the client spends time in the manosphere, they should try to check the underlying motivation and the impact of this activity on the client's life. On the one hand, the manosphere may be a source of social support: according to Speckhard et al. (2021), almost three-quarters of incels report that spending time in the manosphere gives them a sense of belonging and 58%—that it makes them less lonely. On the other hand, in a study by Whittaker et al. (2024), interaction with another incel within two weeks before the study predicted justification of violence. Also, due to frequently occurring anti-therapeutic content their motivation for therapy might be decreased (Ellenberg et al., 2024). *Blackpill* ideology involves helplessness and lack of control over one's own life (Moskalenko et al., 2022a). Thus exposure to *blackpill* content may intensify the depressive symptoms, taking into account that learned helplessness is a well-known mechanism of emergence of depressive symptoms (Miller & Seligman, 1975). Moreover, *blackpill* involves also a belief that suicide is the only way to end the suffering. Thus, *blackpill* content may promote pro-suicide sentiments (Tastenhoye et al., 2023). On the IncelGraveyard forum of Reddit, there are even some posts encouraging other users to commit suicide (Daly & Laskovsov, 2022). Thus, if the client is influenced by *blackpill* ideology, the specialist should pay attention to suicidal risk. A more adaptive point of view is represented by *whitepill,* which is based on minimizing romantic and sexual desire and maximizing happiness by seeking fulfillment in other spheres of life, e.g., education or hobbies (Williams et al., 2021).

Another challenge in the work with an incel client may be the work on their self-esteem. On the one hand, incels have lower self-esteem than non-incels (Sparks et al., 2024a). On the other hand, they have a higher level of sexual entitlement than non-incels (Sparks et al., 2024a). Moreover, self-esteem is significantly negatively correlated with sexual entitlement (Sparks et al., 2024a). Thus a therapist who works with an incel client has to help them improve their self-esteem but, at the same time, reduce their sexual entitlement.

Broyd et al. (2023) suggest that cognitive-behavioral techniques may be helpful in working with incel clients because they would help them to modify their dysfunctional beliefs. Tastenhoye et al. (2022) suggest that motivational interviewing, rational emotive behavioral therapy, and narrative therapy may help address the fatalism underlying the *blackpill* ideology. Another approach that may be useful in working with incel clients is schema therapy. It is focused on identifying and modifying early maladaptive schemas in the client's mindset, inter alia emotional deprivation scheme, social undesirability scheme, and en-

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titlement scheme (Schmidt et al., 1995). The emotional deprivation scheme is based on the belief that one's need for an emotional bond will never be fulfilled. The social undesirability scheme is based on a belief that one is unquestionably undesirable to others, e.g., due to a lack of physical attractiveness. The entitlement scheme is based on a belief that other people owe something (e.g., sex) to one, regardless of their own needs and preferences. Those schemas are salient in the incel ideology. They are possible to overcome with various cognitive, behavioral and experiential strategies, e.g. the patients with social undesirability scheme benefit from behavioral strategies based on the exposure to social situations (Young et al., 2003).

Broyd et al. (2023) suggest that resistance among incels may be lower during an online, group-based therapy. Group-based therapy shifts, to a certain extent, the focus from the therapist (who, as Broyd et al. 2023 argue, may be seen as a symbol of success) to other group members. However, the therapist should be careful because incels may see the advice and feedback from non-incels as unsolicited or even humiliating. Thus, there is a need for interventions focused specifically on incels that will address the root causes of their feelings of rejection and alienation.

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Chapter Six. Conducting the Singlehood Experience Qualitative Interview: A Path to Reflexive Practice

Abstract
This chapter shares reflections on research experiences derived from in-depth qualitative interviews conducted with single individuals in Poland, referred to as the Singlehood Experience Qualitative Interview (SEQI). By observing and self-monitoring the research activities during these interviews—an essential criterion for ensuring interview quality—we have organized our reflections into three key areas. First, we take a technical approach to analyze the content of the interview protocol, evaluating its effectiveness in actual interview settings. Second, from a psychosocial perspective, we address specific thematic issues that often require special attention and clarification to ensure high-quality data collection. Third, drawing inspiration from psychoanalytic theories, we highlight qualitative interviews as environments where certain relational patterns emerge. We emphasize the value of analyzing these patterns and their natural occurrence, noting that both the interviewer and the data analyst must understand the relational context of the data collected. In conclusion, we offer several recommendations for conducting qualitative interviews with single individuals, stressing the importance of being mindful of the relational dynamics at play during the interview and utilizing these insights in the qualitative data analysis process.
Keywords: Qualitative interview; interview protocol; self-monitoring; reflexivity; relational patterns

Introduction

Singlehood—defined as not being legally married or in a committed romantic relationship (DePaulo & Morris, 2005)—has become an increasingly common adult life experience (Girme et al., 2023). Various social and cultural changes, such as the delay in forming romantic partnerships (Copen et al., 2012), rising divorce rates (Schoen & Canudas-Romo, 2006), and the growing trend of solo living (DePaulo, 2007; Kislev, 2019), have led to a steady increase in the number of single adults worldwide (Adamczyk & Trepanowski, 2023; Girme et al., 2023).

Recent research highlights that singlehood is not a uniform experience. While some individuals thrive in being single, others may struggle with feelings of

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loneliness, societal stigma, or unfulfilled desires for connection (Girme et al., 2022). These experiences often exist together and can change over time, influenced by personal, relational, and societal factors (Adamczyk, 2021).

To capture this complexity, a narrative, qualitative approach is essential. Rather than focusing solely on whether singlehood results in positive or negative outcomes, narrative research provides a deeper exploration of how individuals understand and experience being single—their emotions, thought processes, decisions, and identities. Personal stories allow us to access the underlying meanings and psychological dynamics of singlehood that are often obscured in quantitative data (Creswell, 2017). Such insights are crucial for understanding not only the challenges of single life but also the nuanced ways in which individuals adapt, cope, and find fulfillment.

Conducting research interviews is a key method for data collection in qualitative studies. As a research technique, interviews are subject to quality assessment (Howitt, 2010). This evaluation often leads to debates regarding the appropriateness of quantitative, qualitative, or project-specific criteria (Flick, 2007). Consequently, various proposals for criteria have emerged (Levitt et al., 2017), with one frequently recommended approach involving reflection on the specific characteristics of the research project.Conducting research interviews is a key method for data collection in qualitative studies. As a research technique, interviews are subject to quality assessment (Howitt, 2010). This evaluation often sparks debates regarding the appropriateness of quantitative, qualitative, or project-specific criteria (Flick, 2007). Consequently, diverse proposals for criteria have emerged (Levitt et al., 2017), with one of the most frequently recommended approaches involving reflection on the specific characteristics of the research project.

The qualitative interview is a relational method of data collection (e.g., Fujii, 2017; Josselson, 2013). Variability in data quality can arise from several factors, including the characteristics of respondents. Even after obtaining informed consent, some individuals may provide less detailed or forthcoming responses. The inclination to recount experiences narratively, known as self-narrative inclination, can encourage more elaborate responses (cf. Soroko, 2013).

Another source of variability in data quality is the competencies of researchers, which include technical, ethical, and personal preparation (Kvale, 2010). Of particular importance is the ability to self-monitor one's involvement in the interview process, referred to as reflexivity (Kvale, 2010; King & Horrocks, 2010).

Reflexivity is defined as a set of practices that allow researchers to critically assess how their subjectivity influences the research process (Olmos-Vega, 2022). It requires critical thinking and an analysis of one's emotions and their effects on data collection and interpretation (Beale & Hillege, 2004). Reflexivity ac-

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knowledges the subjectivity inherent in qualitative research, transforming it into a valuable tool.

Willig (2001) identifies two dimensions of reflexivity: epistemological, which focuses on assumptions about the nature of the investigated world and methods of analysis, and personal, which examines how researchers' beliefs, identities, and experiences influence the research process.

Reflexivity is particularly important in research on singlehood, as researchers' own relational experiences and social positioning can shape how they interpret the complex and often stigmatized realities of single life. To more accurately and ethically capture participants' lived experiences, research should engage in both personal reflexivity—critical reflection on one's assumptions, expectations, and emotional responses—and interpersonal reflexivity, which involves analyzing power dynamics and the relational context of the research process (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023).

These considerations form the foundation of this chapter. We explore experiences related to the use of in-depth interviews in research focused on singlehood, specifically through the Singlehood Experience Qualitative Interview (SEQI) method. We argue that analyzing excerpts from these interviews will enhance reflexivity practices in future research projects utilizing this approach.

Our implementation of this aim follows the heuristic conceptual framework illustrated in Figure 1. First, we examine the SEQI protocol and analyze elements of the researchers' statements that extend beyond the scripted scenarios (Figure 1, field 1), drawing on our understanding of interview techniques. Next, we consider the participants' responses to the protocol and assess how various experiences influence the quality of the data collected (Figure 1, field 2). In this section, we account for the researchers' competencies and the socio-psychological context surrounding the interviews.

The following step involves analyzing relational patterns that reveal the internally-driven dynamics of interaction between the researcher and the respondent (Figure 1, field 3), using concepts from clinical psychology and psychotherapy theories. Finally, we provide recommendations for future research involving individuals who are single (Figure 1, field 4).

Our observations will be illustrated with examples (quotes) from a pool of 40 in-depth interviews conducted as part of a broader mixed-method research project utilizing an exploratory sequential design (Creswell, 2012). In this study, qualitative data collection preceded and informed a subsequent quantitative phase. The project, titled "Singlehood in Terms of the Ambiguous Loss Theory: The Link Between Singlehood and Mental Health in the Perspective of Moderation and Mediation Functions of Selected Psychological Factors," is led by Katarzyna Adamczyk (National Science Centre, Poland, Grant No. UMO-2019/34/E/HS6/00164). Its objective is to explore the experiences of long-term sin-

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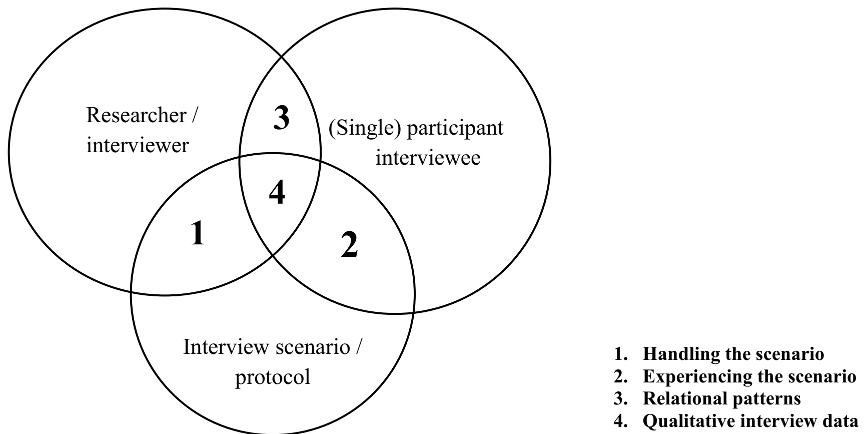

Figure 1. Key Areas of Reflection on the Singlehood Experience Qualitative Interview

glehood and its implications for mental health among never-married single adults in Poland.

In line with the theoretical framework, the project adopts the perspective of singlehood as an ambiguous loss. This refers to a situation in which an individual experiences the psychological presence but the physical absence of a romantic partner. As defined by Boss (2006) and applied to singlehood by Jackson (2018), this type of loss is characterized by uncertainty about whether and when a partner will appear, making it emotionally significant yet often invisible to others. Experiencing this kind of loss may lead single individuals to feel unloved or inadequate due to their inability to find a partner, and it may contribute to feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and depression (Jackson, 2018).

In this context, the interviews focused on the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions to gain a deeper understanding of the psychological impact of long-term singlehood, as well as the subtle forms of loss and adaptation it may involve. This perspective is particularly relevant for those at risk of ambiguous loss associated with singlehood and its related mental health challenges (Jackson, 2018).

The study sample consisted of 40 intentionally selected never-married, childless, long-term single individuals, including 18 women and 22 men. The participants were aged between 20 and 43, with a mean age of 30.50 years (SD = 6.17). Data were collected over a five-month period, from December 2020 to May 2021, through semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted online via platforms such as Skype, Zoom, Teams, or WhatsApp, depending on the participants' preferences. Each interview lasted between 67 and 103 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

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1. Analysis of the singlehood experience qualitative interview "in action"

While the interview process (cf. Howitt, 2010) includes preparatory phases (such as protocol creation and participant recruitment) as well as concluding phases (which involve providing support for interviewers, ensuring data protection, and transcribing interviews), this analysis will focus on the middle phase—the interaction between the researcher and the single participant. We will examine the interview protocol as both a tool for data collection and a source of inspiration for reflecting on its structure, style, and the implications of using specific questions.

1.1. Theoretical justification for the content of the interview protocol

In the studies that inform these reflections, in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews were utilized. This approach allows for flexibility in conducting conversations while providing precision in organizing questions, which helps in obtaining reliable and consistent data. It enables a deeper exploration of the investigated phenomenon by allowing interviewees to freely express their experiences, feelings, and emotions. Additionally, questions can be adapted based on the specificity of participants' responses (Kvale, 2012; Creswell, 2017). Consistency across interviews was maintained by constructing a scenario using the SEQI interview protocol. This scenario served as a preliminary organization of the content and was developed after reviewing existing literature on singlehood, as well as conducting a pilot study to test the interview procedure (Adamczyk et al., 2021; Adamczyk et al., 2024).

The literature review targeted several key aspects: the concept of ambiguous loss in the context of singlehood (e.g., Boss, 2006; Jackson, 2018), coping strategies related to ambiguous loss (Jackson, 2018), psychological well-being among single individuals (e.g., Adamczyk, 2017), and the mental health implications of prolonged singlehood (e.g., Jackson, 2018; Pepping et al., 2018).

The final version of the SEQI protocol, which we will reference, includes 12 main areas of questions designed to gather insights about the experience of singlehood and its consequences. Participants' narratives were further explored through additional questions, clarifications, and prompts aimed at elaborating on specific themes. A detailed description of the purpose and theoretical assumptions behind each question in the interview protocol is provided in Table 1.

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Table 1. Contents of the Interview Protocol and Its Assumptions

Interview stage		Objectives/Assumptions
Briefing	Introduction to the research purpose and interview process; re-confirming consent for participation, transcription, and using anonymized quotes in scientific reports	
Interview Start	*To start, could you briefly tell me something about yourself so that I can get to know you a little before our conversation?*	Short conversation unrelated to the research topic Introduction to the respondent's life context according to their preferences Familiarizing the respondent with the presence of the recorder
Question 1	*Please tell me about your life as a single person [how is it for you to live as a single person?], referring to how it was in the past, how it is now, and how you see your future.*	Stimulating the respondent to provide a narrative, a spontaneous story about their experience of not having a romantic partner The narrative allows for the expression of individual perspectives and experiences in a way that reflects the participants' lives and thoughts before being influenced by the researcher's directed questions (Soroko, 2009; 2015) Emphasizing the importance of presenting one's own experiences due to social deficit narratives about single life (e.g., perceiving singles as lonely, cold, anti-social, immature, insecure, or less satisfied with life compared to married individuals (Etaugh, Malstrom, 1981; Greitemeyer, 2009; Hertel et al., 2007)
Question 2	*Please tell me the story of how it happened that you currently do not have a life partner.*	Capturing the individual context of the current relationship status; Depending on the themes introduced by the participants, stories may provide information about the reasons for singlehood, developmental processes, and adaptation to relationship status. Key in the context of prior research indicating the complexity of interpersonal and social factors shaping the experience of singlehood (Girme et al., 2023).
Question 3	*And how do you see your future when it comes to relationships?*	Exploring the respondent's expectations regarding life in a relationship and/or singlehood in the future. Deepening the individual experience in case of references to the vision of the future in the initial narrative (possibility to expand on responses or address previously unmentioned themes).

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(Continued)

Interview stage		Objectives/Assumptions
Question 4	*To what extent is your current situation—being single —in line with your desires?*	Exploring the subjective assessment and satisfaction of the participant with their current life situation in the area of romantic life. The degree of satisfaction with the current relationship status is a better predictor of life satisfaction and mental health than the single status itself (Adamczyk, 2017).
Question 5	*And how would you like it to look in the future? / What are your desires regarding this in the future?*	Encouraging the respondent to reflect on their aspirations, goals, and ideal vision of the future concerning relationships and/or being single. Discovering the motivations behind the individual's goals in this area.
Question 6	*We have already talked a bit about how you see the future. Sometimes we do not have clear information about what the future will bring, including what the future will bring in terms of relationships. How do you experience such a lack of information about your future?*	Checking what the uncertainty of singlehood means to respondents. The lack of information about whether and when a single person will enter a romantic relationship relates to the concept of ambiguous loss (a situation of unclear loss that remains unverified and thus without resolution; Boss, 2016). This experience may leave some people in a state of suspension and risk experiencing chronic grief (Jackson, 2018).
Question 7	*Do you feel in any way that you are waiting for someone with whom you will create a relationship?*	Checking whether single people experience a state of waiting for a partner. Capturing the personal significance that single people assign to waiting: its understanding, as well as the impact of such a state on mental health. Humans have a rooted need to seek romantic relationships (Cacioppo& Patrick, 2008). Researchers suggest that in the case of uncertainty about future relationships, most single people will maintain hope for a partner (Jackson, 2018).
Question 8	*How would you describe your daily well-being about not being in a relationship?*	Exploration of the perceived effects of singlehood on everyday functioning, especially in the emotional aspect.

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(Continued)

Interview stage		Objectives/Assumptions
Question 9	*We have talked a bit about what your daily life looks like. Considering the current pandemic situation, I am wondering what it is like to live as a single person during a pandemic?*	Identifying contextual factors that may significantly shape the perception of singlehood and its emotional, social, and psychological consequences. The experience of not being in a relationship during the COVID-19 pandemic may differ significantly from the experience of being single in other circumstances, e. g., due to the overall negative impact of the pandemic on mental health and the sense of isolation (Carotta et al., 2022).
Question 10	*How do you see your future now, in the times of the pandemic, when it comes to living as a single person?*	
Question 11	*Finally, I would like to ask how you would define your current relationship status? In everyday language and scientific literature, we encounter various terms for singlehood. I am curious which term feels closest to you?*	Checking how people who are not in a romantic relationship define themselves. The importance of understanding the status of singlehood in a specific scientific field and historical period, considering multiple descriptive criteria (e. g., age, duration of being single, desires, housing situation), and the inability to establish a universal definition (Adamczyk, 2023).
Question 12	*Is there perhaps something we have not discussed yet that you think is important regarding the topics we have covered today?*	An opportunity for the participant to introduce content or themes about singlehood that they considered earlier or during the interview but did not have the chance to share while answering specific questions.
Debriefing	Formal conclusion of the meeting and providing emotional support – Expressing gratitude to the participant for sharing their story; and appreciating the respondent's contribution to the research process. – Providing information about the possibility of supplementing statements after the meeting and asking for consent for future contact if needed. – Asking about the participant's well-being. Offering psychological support if the participant expresses unpleasant emotions or discomfort. – Thanking the participant is a form of recognition and respect.	

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1.2. Preliminary evaluation of the use of the singlehood experience qualitative interview

During the work with the protocol, we identified several questions or phrasings that proved problematic, as they influenced the course of the interview and the quality and depth of the data collected. This assessment was based on post-interview reflections, team debriefings, and preliminary analysis of the transcripts, during which certain questions appeared to inhibit participants' openness or elicit overly brief or guarded responses. Below is an analysis of these issues and suggestions for modifying the protocol in future studies.

For example, the question: *"Please tell the story of how it happened that you currently do not have a life partner"*, demonstrated two significant consequences in participants' responses. First, some respondents appeared to downplay their experiences, especially when those experiences involved strong emotions or discomfort in sharing this aspect of their lives. On the other hand, those who do not view their lack of a partner as significant to their identity tended to minimize the importance of this experience, omitting crucial emotions or reflections relevant to the study. Second, the question may imply that there is a specific reason or "story" behind the absence of a partner, which could lead respondents to feel that their answers must conform to certain expectations or norms. This suggestiveness can restrict their freedom to express personal experiences and insights. We can observe this effect in excerpts from participants' responses (Interview 32):

> P: Well, I don't know. I currently don't have a partner because my last relationship ended quite turbulently because it turned out that, I don't know, well, he was abusive towards me and the children, and somehow it happened that we just broke up [32].

The above response shows a concise and detached way of addressing the reason for the breakup. Although the situation described involves serious and emotionally difficult events (partner's abuse), the respondent uses phrases such as "I don't know" and "somehow it happened," which may indicate an attempt to minimize the weight of the situation. This could be the result of reluctance to delve into a difficult topic or a sense of discomfort in sharing details. A similar example appears in another response (Interview 23):

> P: Nothing special. I was dating someone and we came to the conclusion that we weren't on the same wavelength and that there was no point in continuing to struggle, so we made the decision that, like, (pause) well, yeah, that it would be better for us to be apart. And now, I'm emotionally involved in some relationship, but it's unfortunately quite complicated, and that's why I'm single for now [23].

This response demonstrates a tendency to minimize the emotional weight of the situation, despite involving the end of an important relationship for the re-

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spondent. Phrases such as “nothing special” and “we concluded that…” suggest an effort to downplay feelings or treat the situation as unimportant or trivial. To encourage more authentic and varied responses, we recommend rephrasing the question to a more neutral format, such as, “Please share your journey to your current life as a single person.” This approach allows participants to explore both external and internal factors influencing their situation freely. It also helps avoid implying that the absence of a partner must be rooted in a specific story or that being in a relationship is inherently the desired state.

Now, let us look at the formulation of another question: *“How would you describe your daily well-being about not being in a relationship?”* This formulation can narrow participants’ experiences by focusing on one aspect. Such a question makes it difficult for the respondent to reflect on the entirety of their life experiences, which might include other important spheres. Moreover, it suggests that the lack of a partner affects daily well-being, which may lead respondents to answer in accordance with this implied thesis. People who do not see the absence of a partner as a significant issue may feel pressured to conform their answers to the assumed norm, neglecting their authentic feelings. This phenomenon appears across many interviews, suggesting that it is a common element for different interviewees:

a) Due to a misunderstanding of the question (Interview 20)

> I: …but I wanted to ask, how would you describe your well-being on a daily basis about not being in a relationship?
> P: [uhh] In the sense: of well-being from being alone, like that?
> I: Yes, but also does, and if so, how does the fact that you are not in a relationship affect your overall well-being [20]?

b) Giving vague responses, difficulty in abstracting part of the experience (Interview 12)

> P: Daily well-being. Good. I mean, I don’t feel bad or depressed daily, sometimes there are periods, you know, various external stimuli, uh (5 sec) I feel free in my surroundings, generally, daily, nothing overwhelms me, doesn’t cause me any difficulties, and when such difficulties arise, I try to solve them right away […][12].

c) Adjusting the response to the suggestive question in the first reaction (Interview 25)

> P: [uhh] I would describe it as rather good.
> I: Rather good, mhm. Okay, why rather?

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> P: [uhh] I do miss being in a relationship, but on the other hand, I have a large group of people who support me, and I haven't felt [uhh], I don't experience being single at the moment [uhh] as something I need to finish "right now, right away" [25].

To obtain more multifaceted and sincere responses, we suggest splitting the discussed question into two parts. The first part should focus on the respondent's general well-being without reference to their relationship status, e.g., *"How do you feel on a daily basis? What are your general feelings about daily life?"* This way of questioning gives the respondent the freedom to describe their well-being without suggestions regarding interpersonal relationships. Only later, after obtaining a general response about well-being, can a more specific and neutral question be asked, such as: *"Does your relationship status (being single) affect these feelings? How?"* This approach allows the respondent space to reflect on whether the lack of a partner is truly a significant factor influencing their daily life while also allowing them to freely speak about other, equally important aspects of their well-being (cf. a similar solution in episodic narrative interview – Mueller, 2019).

In the interview, we used narrative prompts (stimuli) as invitations to share stories about personal experiences of singlehood. For some participants, the instruction did not elicit the desired narratively structured response. Difficulties in initiating a narrative can be illustrated by the following example (Interview 58):

> I: If you were to tell a story about how it came to be that you are currently not in a relationship, what would that story be? P: (pause) As I said, it is hard to point to any particular change when it has always been this way. It simply never felt motivating enough for me to change it, right? A few women I met, well… [uh] it is not that I broke up with them or anything like that. I just… did not show enough initiative to keep it going. Later, I decided I would not make someone unhappy this way, so I stopped even trying [58].

As illustrated above, narrative stimuli did not consistently encourage participants to provide autobiographical accounts. Some respondents offered brief and detached statements, indicating a lower level of narrative engagement. Rather than viewing this as a failure of the instructions, we attribute it to individual tendencies toward recounting their own experiences, which we define as self-narrative inclination (Soroko, 2009) or, alternatively, developmentally-informed narrative competence (e.g., Berman, 1995).

In many interviews, participants responded to narrative prompts with accounts that met established narrative criteria. These accounts demonstrated both narrative intuition—the inherent understanding of what constitutes a "good story" (cf. Trzebiński, 2004)—and a coherent narrative structure, including a beginning, development, and conclusion (Labov, 2009). Obtaining detailed

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narrative accounts provides significant advantages for analyzing how participants construct their experiences, assign meaning, and portray themselves as protagonists in their stories. This approach also opens up additional analytical possibilities, such as narrative analysis (e. g., Corssley, 2007). In the appendix, we present two highly narrative responses to the narrative prompt (Interview 28 and Interview 49).

1.3. The role of contextual questions in the interview: The influence of social and health factors

Due to the pandemic, the interview protocol included questions about the consequences of the pandemic (e. g., *We have talked a bit about what your daily life looks like. Considering the current pandemic situation, I am wondering what it is like to live as a single person during a pandemic?*), which served as examples of context-sensitive questions. The pandemic, resulting in lockdown regulations, and restrictions on face-to-face interactions may have had obvious consequences for the relational functioning of single individuals, particularly those seeking a partner. Participants' responses indicate that this thematic area proved central to their experiences. This is illustrated by the following participant statement (Interview 20):

> P: I mean, during COVID, I felt lonelier, and my mood was worse. I felt my single status more strongly. Earlier, it did not bother me as much—or hardly at all, to be honest. But during COVID, I often heard people saying they were only seeing their boyfriend or girlfriend, their partner. That was quite upsetting because, for instance, I was not seeing anyone. But if I had a partner, then I would have someone to meet up with [20].

Context-sensitive questions can assist researchers in understanding how specific situations, such as social or health crises, impact individual experiences of loneliness, relationships, and opportunities for social interaction. The interviews also uncovered spontaneous comments that highlighted additional contextual factors influencing participants' experiences of being single. For instance, one participant discussed their sexual orientation in relation to the country's social climate (Interview 64):

> P: I think that, actually, when it comes to my life as a single non-heterosexual person, it is also important to outline the current social situation in Poland. I feel it has cast a shadow on my mental well-being. I have been thinking more and more about building my life abroad. While my immediate social circle is very supportive and accepting, I feel that the broader atmosphere in Poland is not necessarily conducive to settling down and planning my future here. So, I guess that is something I would highlight as important [64].

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In this case, The participant mentioned that while their close social circle was supportive, the wider social environment in Poland—particularly concerning non-heterosexual individuals—prompted them to consider emigrating. This consideration affected their single status.

It is valuable for researchers to identify connections between participants' experiences and the broader social, political, economic, and historical contexts. This approach provides deeper insights into how external factors shape individuals' lives, influencing their attitudes, emotions, and life plans, especially in the area of interpersonal relationships.

2. Selected content areas related to the singlehood experience qualitative interview

Certain topics raised in the research interviews drew particular attention. The selection presented here is illustrative and emerges from the analysis of the material and reflections on its interpretation.

2.1. Future-oriented reflections on being in a relationship

The interview protocol introduced the topic of temporal perspective, addressing scenarios regarding the future of being single or being in a relationship. For some participants, this topic proved challenging. Let us examine the following response (Interview 40):

> I: Okay, since you have already mentioned this a bit, how do you see your future regarding relationships? P: (sigh) I don't know. I mean, I might have to move, and maybe when I settle in [big city], I'll start thinking about it, but I… Right now, I can't really say anything about it, because… because… Since I've never been in any kind of relationship… I just don't know, I just don't know… For now, today, I simply don't have any plans or expectations, and maybe… maybe I'll think about it when I settle in [big city], but who knows. […] I: Mhm. And how would you like this relationship to look like? P: (sigh, long silence) Honestly, I don't have any ideas about that because [uh]… Honestly, I haven't really thought about it, but if I were to say something, [uh]… No, actually, I think I could figure it out as I go, but who knows, because [uh]… It's just that I don't have any personal experience in this area, so- so it's hard to build an idea… Sometimes I come across some online theory, but I just [uh] don't want to build any ideas about relationships based on, I don't know, YouTube videos or [uh] sociological articles or something [40].

The participant's initial reaction suggests difficulty in constructing a vision of the future due to a lack of relational experience. The individual avoids creating ideas

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influenced by external stimuli (e.g., YouTube materials or articles). In their statement, they emphasize the experience of relational absence, which, in their view, cannot be replaced except through real relationship experiences, over which they feel they have limited control. This example invites several reflections. First, the emotional tone of the response suggests that the topic may evoke feelings of sadness, frustration, or helplessness for participants. Second, the lack of readiness to answer may result from an underdeveloped life narrative. Participants with higher narrative self-inclination and competence construct answers more easily, as illustrated by the following response (Interview 27):

> P: If I were to meet someone, the first thing that comes to mind for sure is that I don't want to have children—for several reasons. I didn't have the best family model myself—not that it was any pathology or anything like that—but… […] And I was also a late child, and when I think about meeting someone and having a child with that person, it would be… well, since I'm turning 39 now, that would be after 40, so I'd really be like a father-grandfather to a growing child. I also had that experience, and I remember it poorly. […] I don't remember any meaningful interactions with my parents because they were busy with work, and they simply didn't have the time. I was the kind of child who played alone all the time because there was no other choice. And because of that, I wouldn't seek, or maybe I would, but I'd insist on breaking up if my partner wanted kids. That's actually why my eight-year relationship ended—because she thought a child could fix our situation, but I was very against it [uh]. That was one reason we split up. My stance didn't change. […] I don't feel the need to have kids; I don't want them. I admit, it's also out of convenience. I don't like the idea of sleepless nights and waking up in the middle of the night. I: Mhm P: […] Honestly, if I were to meet someone, she'd have to either already have kids or not want any more. […] Or just not have them and not want them. Also, someone with a similar worldview, perhaps not identical but aligned—politically, socially [uh]. And someone open-minded, who enjoys traveling, and is curious about the world. But if I don't meet such a person, well, that's fine. [U27]

Interview 27 suggests that individuals with well-developed narratives more easily construct visions of the future and perceive their experiences as more predictable. When analyzing interviews, it is worth considering how to discuss the future with individuals who have difficulty imagining it. Besides respecting boundaries and avoiding pressure, it may be useful to examine how participants cognitively represent the future and what significance they assign to relationships. Personal standards and societal expectations may play a key role. Finally, statements about an "empty future" may evoke concern in the researcher or lead to defensive reactions, such as denial or consolation. Being aware of this emotional context is essential, and maintaining professional distance allows participants to freely express their experiences (see Interview 40 – Supplement "Talking About the Future").

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2.2. Sexuality as an emergent theme in qualitative research on singlehood

The interview protocol did not include a specific question about the sexual lives of single individuals. This decision was intentional, aiming to narrow the study's scope and maintain focus. Nonetheless, the topic of sexuality was occasionally brought up spontaneously by participants, sometimes deviating from the planned funnel structure of the interview (moving from general to more specific topics). An example is presented below, where the issue of physical touch arises early in the conversation during the introductory section, demonstrating that for this participant, being single is strongly linked to the experience of a lack of physical contact (Interview 40).

> I: To start, could you briefly introduce yourself so I can get to know you a bit before we move on to the main topic of the study? P: […] And, well, what's important is that I've never been in any kind of relationship. I've always lived alone. I'm just [uh] I'm just a loner. Earlier, it really struck me that, for example [uh]… I… never experienced touching another person for longer than… a minute. In my entire life. I: Mhm, but you know what, I'll ask you more about being alone in a moment. For now, could you tell me a little more about yourself outside of this aspect of your life? You mentioned growing up in the countryside, right? Then you moved away for a while and now you're back, correct? [40]

The interviewer's response does not acknowledge this topic, and possibly for this reason, the issue of sexuality (specifically: pornography) is raised again at the end of the interview, as follows:

> I: Is there anything important that I didn't ask about but you think is essential to understanding your experience? Something we haven't covered yet? P: Well, sometimes I wonder about some… I don't know how to put it… issues related to living where I do and the fact that [uh] my only window to the world is my computer. And I'm just a lifelong bachelor. From my personal experience, I'd say… I think I might be at risk of serious problems related to excessive use of pornography. I'm afraid it might make it harder for me to form relationships. For me, this can be a problem. I'd also add that I think it would be an interesting research topic—looking into the accessibility of pornography for Poles. Whether it poses risks and how those risks manifest. I: Do you mean risks to relationships later on? Or are you saying you're reflecting on whether having a computer as your window to the world, combined with being cut off from places with more people, could increase the likelihood of using pornography? [40]

Omitting sexuality as a topic in the interviews has both relational (e.g., difficulty discussing sexuality, comfort levels of the interviewer and participant) and scientific (e.g., lack of connections between singlehood and sexual experiences) consequences. One possible conclusion might be the need for studies explicitly and meaningfully linking experiences of singlehood with sexual experiences.

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2.3. The importance of clarifying ambiguous narratives and challenging presumed shared meanings

Reflections on participants' reception of the interview revealed responses with experiences conveyed ambiguously and incompletely. We noted various expressions—psychological terms (e.g., "depression," "openness to relationships"), conventional metaphors (e.g., "soulmate"), and personal metaphors describing experiences (e.g., "emotional drought"). Participants also referenced applications, locations, or circumstances (e.g., Covid-19, Tinder) that may have been familiar to the interviewer due to shared social contexts. Some expressions referenced psychological terminology, while others stemmed from broader societal discourses on interpersonal and romantic relationships.

The risk arising from the shared reality of researcher and participant (where the participant assumes the interviewer knows the context, and the interviewer refrains from clarifying due to presumed familiarity) is illustrated in this statement (Interview 99): "[Tinder] just doesn't work for me at all." Without clarification, it remains unclear what kind of Tinder usage is being referred to or what "doesn't work" means. One might mistakenly focus on technical rather than psychological aspects (e.g., need for fulfillment). Leaving such statements undefined risks overlooking participants' personal experiences.

An example of addressing a metaphor can be found in Interview 64 (Supplement: Romantic Drought), where the term "romantic drought" prompted follow-up questions about individualized experiences. This revealed descriptions of related feelings, such as the consequences of the pandemic, loneliness, and sadness.

Conversely, an example from Interview 62 shows how both parties used the term "soulmate" [in Polish: drugapołówka] without clarifying its meaning. Although the same term was used, it was unclear what the participant envisioned as a "soulmate" or the qualities of the person they would prefer to spend quarantine time with. Further discussion revealed representations of this person as someone with specific interests that shaped ways of spending time, suggesting that the participant's concept of a "soulmate" was highly individualized (Interview 62):

> P: Regarding relationships, it's definitely not consistent. I'd rather spend this quarantine time at home but with my soulmate.
> I: So… if you were already at home with this soulmate, what would you do together? How do you imagine spending quarantine with that person?
> P: Well, it depends on their interests, primarily. Whether we'd have shared interests, and if so, whether those activities could be done during quarantine. Even if we didn't have shared interests in quarantine activities, we could always compromise—watch a movie or read a book together [62].

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An interesting perspective on areas requiring clarification also emerges in Interview 42, where the participant asks for an explanation of the question and, upon hearing it ("uncertainty about whether and when I'll meet someone to form a relationship with"), identifies the question as referencing the "myth of the ideal soulmate." This leads to intellectual reflections on the topic, integrating literary references, history of ideas, and the social construction of "ideal soulmate" and "romantic love." The participant then reflects on how this myth relates to their experiences, demonstrating how common terms may carry underlying knowledge that, if unspoken, can lead to false understandings (Interview 42):

> I: I'd like to ask you, as I mentioned earlier, we ask everyone the same questions, because in life we don't always have certainty about things—it's obvious we don't have a crystal ball and can't predict the future. Have you ever felt uncertain about whether you'd meet someone to form a relationship with?
> P: Could you clarify the question—what do you mean by whether I'll meet someone?
> I: We mean whether you feel uncertain about whether and when you'll meet someone to form a relationship with.
> P: Oh, you're talking about the myth of the ideal soulmate. I've often heard this romantic idea that we're born like one-winged doves, and only when we find the other half can we fly. From the age of 13, I've had several relationships, so I don't believe in the ideal of romantic love or that there's one perfect person out there for me. Instead, I know that issues can be worked through with communication. I don't feel a void if I don't find "the one." I believe I can form relationships with most people I can connect with [42].

Another example appears in Interview 58, where the participant frequently uses the term "depression" to describe their experience. The interviewer clarifies the participant's individualized descriptions of depression (e.g., "pessimism," "motivation levels"). However, it remains unclear whether "depression" refers to a diagnosed condition or a personal descriptor. Even if it is a diagnosis, its function and implications remain undefined. This suggests that the term "depression" may play an organizing role in framing life experiences (cf. Mrozowicz-Wrońska et al., 2023) (Interview 58):

> P: My whole life has basically been one big depression—that probably defines my past and present life. I've never seen a doctor, but I practically had suicidal thoughts throughout my life until three years ago. Suddenly, I realized those thoughts weren't normal. My motivation hasn't improved much, but my pessimism has eased.
> I: Has that changed?
> P: I moved away from my toxic father, and at work, I had to take a different approach. Maybe contact with my sister's kids helped too. Over time, many things that kept me in depression faded, and more positive aspects appeared.
> I: What do you mean by "pessimism"? In general, or regarding relationships?
> P: In general, about everything. […]
> I: Did it always look like that, or did it change?

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> P: It's been like that since I can remember. My depression probably started in elementary school. My father's depression affected me—he always complained about others, never himself. I mostly blamed myself in my thoughts, which kept the depression going [58].

Finally, there are instances of ambiguity in statements about failed attempts to establish or maintain relationships or unfavorable circumstances. Common phrases include "I couldn't keep up," and "I don't know why," as in Interview 64:

> P: The situation is very specific because of the global pandemic. I've been working from home since March and trying to follow social distancing guidelines. I rarely meet friends or family. Last summer, when restrictions eased, I used Tinder and started some chats, but in the end, nothing came of it. I don't really know why—it just didn't happen [64].

While this example highlights the need for further clarification (e. g., "What do you mean by 'it didn't happen'?"), it's also important to consider the psychological function of such ambiguities. They may serve to avoid difficult emotions (e. g., guilt or failure) or stem from reluctance to elaborate in the interview context. In such cases, it is advisable to refrain from probing further unless the participant shows curiosity about the topic. Conversational difficulties may also reflect relational challenges, such as limited interpersonal skills, difficulties expressing emotions, or unmet needs in relationships. In this sense, the interview provides insights into participants' experiences of being single—not only through what they declare but also through what they enact in the interview situation. These subtleties will be discussed further in the next subsection.

3. Singlehood experience qualitative interview in the context of knowledge about relational patterns

3.1. Relational patterns as a source of knowledge about interpersonal functioning

In this section, we focus on how relational patterns may influence both the content and the dynamics of qualitative interviews, especially when exploring intimate topics such as personal relationships. We emphasize that the interview process is not a neutral transmission of information, but a relational encounter shaped by the interaction between the researcher and the participant. This interaction is influenced by external socio-cultural factors (e. g., societal norms and expectations) as well as internal psychological frameworks (schemas and relational patterns).

A key concept here is *researcher positionality*, defined as the stance or role the researcher adopts in the research context (Savin-Baden & Major, 2010). Posi-

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tionality includes the researcher's awareness of their social and psychological placement relative to participants, which affects how data is produced and interpreted. Instead of attempting to suppress their position or biases, we argue for transparent reflexivity: researchers should actively reflect on their influence during the interview. However, interpersonal functioning in qualitative interviews can be explained through both socio-cultural positioning and the internal worlds (psyche) of the interaction partners—both the interviewer and the participant. An intra-psychic perspective, rooted in psychoanalytic and psychodynamic literature, where relational patterns are conceptualized, may provide a valuable complement for analyzing qualitative data.

As noted by Kvale (2010), the research interview occupies a space between a philosophical dialogue and a therapeutic interview—combining elements of both while avoiding intellectual argumentation and overly intimate relationships. Due to its resemblance to a therapeutic situation, research interviews can reveal relational phenomena, even within the constraints of time and context. While the research setting differs from therapy in terms of time, contract, and relationship dynamics, utilizing knowledge about relational processes can aid in understanding the dynamics of conversations about personal matters (cf. Kvale, 2003; Hollway& Jefferson, 2000; Holmes, 2013a, 2013b; Midgley, 2006; Soroko, 2015). Concepts such as transference and countertransference (e.g., Gabbard, 2014) and object relations theory (e.g., Kernberg, 2005) can serve as theoretical foundations for further analysis.

In this section, we consider the extent to which a research interview, where the researcher addresses intimate personal topics concerning the participant's close relationships, represents a situation where certain relational patterns (a personal tendency to engage in important social relationships with an individual dynamic; Luborsky, 1998) may emerge, even in a reduced form. The data collected may thus serve as a lens through which to examine the participant's relational functioning (both in form and content). This, in turn, may heighten the researcher's sensitivity to potential phenomena occurring during the interview process and may enable a more precise psychological understanding of how the participant experiences singlehood. Single individuals, for whom relationships may pose a challenge, may not only describe their difficulties but also unconsciously reenact them during the conversation. The researcher may be invited to assume a relational role they had not anticipated. The researcher's reflexivity, enabling them to observe the situation from a distance, plays an important role in both therapeutic practice and qualitative research (Soroko, 2015).

Relational patterns have been examined as both external (behaviors) and internal (psychological structures) phenomena. In this chapter, by a relational pattern, we mean a personal tendency to engage in important social relationships with certain wishes (intentions, needs), to expect (anticipate) specific reactions

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from others, and to respond to these reactions (see, e.g., Luborsky, 1998). Relational patterns, rooted in early experiences (e.g., attachment theory, Bowlby, 1988; object relations theory, Kernberg, 2005), shape beliefs about self and others and influence interactions in close relationships. These patterns consist of mental representations of self and others, as well as associated emotions. They may manifest both in participants' narratives and behaviors during interviews (e.g., brief responses or excessive dependence on the researcher).

Therefore, qualitative interviews are relational spaces where both parties bring their internal relational templates, which interact and shape the flow of conversation. Understanding these dynamics can enrich data interpretation by allowing researchers to recognize how participants' interpersonal functioning might be both described and enacted in the interview. This insight is especially valuable when studying topics like singlehood, which involves complex relational challenges.

Attachment styles may serve as a heuristic tool for organizing relational functioning patterns observed in interviews (see Table 2). Although attachment theory is traditionally applied to close and enduring relationships, such as those between children and caregivers or romantic partners, its contemporary applications have expanded into various relational contexts, including psychotherapy and qualitative research interviews. From
a psychodynamic perspective, the interviewer–interviewee relationship can evoke attachment dynamics, particularly when the interview touches upon emotionally significant or vulnerable topics.

In such settings, the researcher may come to function as a temporary 'safe base', facilitating emotional exploration and meaning-making. This broadened use of attachment theory is supported by current developments in psychodynamic research, which emphasize the role of transference and countertransference processes in understanding intersubjective experiences, even beyond the clinical setting (Strømme i in., 2010; Kvale, 2003; Holmes, 2013a). Therefore, applying attachment theory in this context provides a valuable framework for understanding the relational processes that could occur during qualitative interviews.

Table 2. Possible Manifestations of Attachment Style in The Interview as a Relational Situation

Attachment style	Possible manifestations (reactions) in the interview
Avoidant	Avoiding answering specific questions, giving perfunctory statements, changing the subject, minimizing the importance of the experiences discussed, and denying the affective component.

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(Continued)

Attachment style	Possible manifestations (reactions) in the interview
Anxious	Excessive detail in statements, need for approval from the researcher, emphasizing one's own shortcomings or difficulties in relationships, dependence on the researcher and his activity.
Disorganized	Inconsistency of the narrative, interweaving avoidance of answers with excessive sharing of personal details.
Secure	Providing clear, constructive answers about the question asked; open to reflection.

3.2. Relational patterns in play – examples

Relational patterns can manifest in various forms (topics, modes). Below, we discuss several examples, showing how they can be identified during exchanges in interviews.

Initiative vs. Passivity

A noticeable relational theme in the analyzed interviews is initiative vs. passivity (withdrawal, mistrust). There were instances where the *content layer*—understood here as the verbal content of what the participant expressed—revealed themes of difficulty with taking initiative or a tendency to withdraw from relationships. Notably, this dynamic was also reflected in the participant's overall relational stance towards the interviewer. For example, the interviewer became more active, asked more questions, and tolerated silence less, while the interviewee remained in a more passive role, giving brief responses and cutting them short. The following examples illustrate this disproportion (Interview 2):

> P: It seems like you need to pull information out of me.
> I: Mhm. To begin with, I'd like you to tell me about your life on your own.
> P: Well, like I said, I've been single for three years. I live alone, I rent an apartment. I adopted a dog to make it more bearable. And so it goes. For now, I'm not looking for anyone. It's just fine. I don't even complain about it. (pause) I don't know what will happen next.
> I: Could you tell me more about your past, your relationships, and life on your own?
> P: Relationships didn't go well for me. The longest one lasted a year and a half. Before that, my longest relationship was three years. I worked with him, we knew each other, worked together for two years. We started seeing each other, moved in together, but after a year it fell apart. So I moved out, and we haven't kept in touch since. It didn't work out too well, we argued all the time.

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I: Mhm. Did something earlier make that relationship valuable for you, did you create it for some reason?
P: Well, he started to appear more in my life. And after a while, I decided, I was giving him so much time, that I decided maybe something would come of it. And once I decided, things started to fall apart.
[…]
I: Mhm. I'm wondering what would be an indicator for you that 'okay, I'm ready.'
P: I don't really know, I haven't thought about it.
I: Would you like to try for a moment? Or maybe something comes to your mind?
P: I really don't know how that would work. I don't know what kind of security I would need to feel like things would work out, that nothing bad would happen.
I: Mhm.
P: I don't know, I haven't thought about it. It's hard to say what that would be.
I: How would you recognize it in a relationship with a man?
P: I don't know, like I said, I haven't thought about it.
[…]
I: As we're talking, I have the feeling that when you speak about the future, this topic of trust, of opening up, seems really important for you.
P: It is. Like I said, I won't open up to just anyone, I don't like it. I can talk about regular things, but to really open up, you have to build trust first.
P: For me, the situation will likely remain the same. I don't feel the need to be with someone, I don't see the need for it, I don't feel that way, so for now, I won't be looking for that other person. I won't be checking if this person might be okay for me if we could have something more. [2]

The interviewee signals almost at the beginning of the conversation what unfolds throughout the rest of the discussion: the researcher tries to ask more questions, extract information, is very active, seeks points of contact, and puts in the effort. The interviewee, on the other hand, responds briefly, often in a way that hinders the potential for exploration or reflection. In the excerpts above, the interviewee also reveals her mistrust of new people or reluctance to take the initiative in seeking a partner. This is further illustrated in the interview: the distancing is visible in both the length of the interviewee's responses and the content that reflects it, as well as in expressions that close the topic.

The passivity of the interviewee, as a potential interpersonal disposition, is also reflected in the course of the entire interview (Interview 23). Here, from the beginning, the researcher takes the initiative, and asks many questions, and the exchange relies on relatively short, often interrupted responses, as illustrated in the quotes below (Interview 23).

I: Do you feel like you can wait, or do you have an experience of waiting in your life, do you feel like you're waiting for someone to create a relationship with?
P: Well, today, yes, a bit. Because as I mentioned earlier, there's a specific person who exists, but they need to sort their life out for us to be together. So, yes, I'm waiting. That's a good way to put it.

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I: So you're waiting for this person to sort their things out.
P: Well, sort them out or not. I don't know.
[…]
I: Do I understand correctly that, well, you're single right now, but in the past, there were relationships?
P: Yes.
I: Could you tell me how it happened that you're single now, how that happened, what led to this moment in your life?
P: Nothing special. I was seeing someone, and we came to the conclusion that we weren't on the same wavelength and that it didn't make sense to keep going, so we decided it would be better to separate. Now I'm emotionally involved in a relationship, but it's quite complicated, so I'm still alone.
I: I see. And the relationship you mentioned, did it end nine years ago? Or did I misunderstand?
P: It's been three years.
I: I see. So this relationship ended about three years ago, right?
P: (silence) No. The last person I saw, we weren't a couple, we just hung out last summer. My last serious relationship ended maybe two years ago. [23].

Interpersonal Control and Power Asymmetry

Another emerging phenomenon in the interviews is interpersonal control. This mechanism is often visible both in content and structure. It's an important topic as it may affect the researcher's agency and sense of control during the interview, their freedom of exploration, or the asymmetry of roles in the study (Interview 18).

I: How did it turn out, what do you mean?
P: For it to develop more naturally, because my experiences kind of confirm what I heard in therapy, that if I approached certain things with a set of expectations, with a bundle of expectations, then later I kind of sabotaged it. And now, I hope that if I don't approach it thinking something must happen, or that this or that will happen at some point, but just approach it more spontaneously, like let's see what happens, I won't plan or control, I'll just try to enjoy what's happening, then it will come out more naturally, and indeed, there's a chance that something will come of it.
[…]
I: What I meant is that, well, generally speaking, we don't know what will happen in our life, right, where we'll live, what we'll do, etc. We also don't know whether we'll be in a relationship or not, right, whether we'll meet someone or not, and I'm wondering if you have the experience of not knowing whether you'll be in a relationship or not.
P: Do you mean how I feel about this uncertainty, like whether I'll ever be in a relationship?
I: More like, does this uncertainty accompany you at all, maybe first?
P: Ah (15 seconds). That's a tough question, I haven't thought about it for a long time (10 seconds). I'm not sure, I'm not sure. I try to check it, but I don't know if this

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uncertainty accompanies me (15 seconds). I have this feeling, I don't know how to say it, I'm not sure if this is an answer to your question. Sometimes I have this feeling, this feeling that I'm unlovable, unnecessary, but I'm not sure if it's my feeling or if it's something I've absorbed from someone in my family. Sometimes, before, it often accompanied me, this, hmm, this feeling of uncertainty, like "Oh God, one day, I might actually end up alone and it will be a tragedy, it will be awful." But I don't feel that way now. It's definitely not as strong anymore, uh, it's not as strong and disruptive as it used to be. I used to feel like it was a big drama, but not anymore.
I: And how is it now?
P: I try not to think about it. I wonder why because it used to hurt, but I guess not anymore. Mm. It's an uncomfortable feeling for me… this uncertainty about the future is something that makes me uncomfortable. I like to control things. Uh… yeah… Some part of it I learned in therapy too, to get used to it in a sense, mm, partly to get used to uncertainty, to the fact that the future is unpredictable, that's kind of what I meant when I was talking about my dating. […] But (5 sec) it's definitely uncomfortable for me to endure this, to live in this uncertainty, but I guess I can't say that I have any negative feelings or thoughts about it.
I: What is this discomfort for you?
P: Well, it's the feeling of lacking a specific control. I can't do anything about it, I don't know what to do about it, uh, to make it right, and if it goes wrong, then what? Mm. Yeah, that's how I approach it. No, I'm not comfortable with not knowing what will happen, not being able to influence it, not having control over it, not being able to do anything about it [18].

Control in the exchange above (Interview 18) appears to be a key theme. The interviewee describes it as problematic, something that emerged in his therapy, but also as something necessary, as without a sense of control, they experience significant discomfort. It's important to place the exchange in the context of the entire interview. At the beginning, the interviewee shared that they wanted to contribute as much value as possible to the study and wondered how they could prepare for it; during the interview, they also mentioned often adapting to others. This led to a conversation with many long, detailed responses, in which the interviewee shared personal experiences (perhaps in a desire to fit in with the interviewer, making it easier for them by providing extensive material). In the exchange above, roughly halfway through the interview, it seems that the interviewee felt uncomfortable with the lack of control over the conversation—uncomfortable topics emerged, and with them, more long pauses (which hadn't occurred before), and relatively shorter responses, often cut off (Interview 16).

I: I understand that it somehow connects, right, but… we're more interested in this aspect, right, of life where, for various reasons, one is not in a permanent relationship with someone. How is that for you?
P: It seems to me that it's natural for me now, it wasn't as natural before, because I had, umm, well, I think… I thought about it recently and I just think I've, like, grown, I don't know, I can't say I've matured to this, because it's not really a feature of maturity, but it's

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like I realized that… that it's largely imposed by society.
I: Mhm
P: Like, when, when should a person be happy, society imposes that if someone isn't in a relationship or something, they should feel unhappy and their ambition should be to create a romantic relationship, and it should be somewhere, I don't know, in the middle, not at the very top of the needs pyramid, but somewhere at the bottom, that it should be a foundation, that first a person should have shelter, have food, and should fall in love, and that it's supposed to be one person, and when this person, for example, dies, they will cry for them for the rest of their life, and will be in deep mourning. […] We just close ourselves off to the world and simply do what they tell us on TV, and that's our mission, we take this vision of the world as our own, and in the same way, I don't know, politicians also experience this love and think, for example, that marriage is in the constitution, and that it's so important.
[…]
P: I just agree with the fact that it is what it is, that it turned out this way, I had those experiences, I don't know if it's a result of upbringing or my relationships with others. Well, it's hard to say, I don't know, I'm more interested in what's happening outside.
I: Mhm
P: And I try to find something in it rather than just thinking about myself (pause) because I have to admit, I sometimes have a hard time understanding my feelings.
[…]
I: How would you describe your life being single right now?
P: Well, pretty normally (laughs).
I: So, how? How would you describe it? What does your single life look like now?
P: I don't know, would you ask yourself that question and be able to answer it?
I: Well, it just happens that I'm asking you, but does it…
P: Well, what I mean is, is it a good question? Because I don't know, it's hard for me to answer.
I: Ah, I see.
P: We can talk about specifics, but it's hard for me to say about…
I: Well, how does it come to mind when a question like this is asked? How would you answer it, just like how does your single life look like? Of course, I'm not asking about your studies, right, or what you do in relation to your studies, I'm just asking about this area of your life, the fact that you're not in a permanent relationship right now. How would you describe your life daily, how is it?
P: Awesome.
I: Mhm
P: I don't worry about anything.
I: Mhm
P: It's funny because people on the Internet do very strange things because their biological clock is ticking, and whether they are women or men, they do weird things, you know. (laughs) And they wake up every day and discover new things.
I: Mhm, and how about you? I understand that you don't do those things, but how does daily life look for you?
P: I don't know. I mean… I like memes about asexuality.
I: Mhm

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P: I think they're okay, and that's also a mechanism to deal with it somehow.
[…]
I: How would you describe the reasons or the history of how it happened that you're currently single?
P: (silence) Well, nothing happened, that's the point (laughs).
I: Mhm
P: No, no, I don't know, I'm not a divorcee (laughs).
I: Ah, I see. Well, in this question, you know, it's more about how you, do you understand, not that I'm asking for an explanation, no, but just how it happened, right, like how it came to be, if you see your role in it, or if it just happened, or if it was your choice, how would you describe it from your perspective, how it happened that you're currently single?
P: (silence) eeee
I: It's a question we ask everyone.
P: I don't know, I think it wasn't my choice at the time, but now I think it is, there's been a change.
[…]
P: Well, you have to work through social conditioning, and after I thought about all these things, then it all came together for me in an image, maybe it's the way I was raised or something to do with my mother, or maybe it's about my father. On the other hand, maybe it's about my looks, maybe all these things I thought about myself aren't true. Well… [16]

The above quotes are from the same interview and are arranged chronologically (16). From the very beginning, the participant focused mainly on external perspectives—social, political, biological, and the experiences of acquaintances or strangers. The first quote illustrates a fragment of one of these lengthy responses on the topic. In response, the researcher tries to take control and repeatedly asks about the subject of the study, namely the individual's experiences and feelings. The participant signals in various ways that they place more emphasis on the external than on the internal, locating control externally. It seems that this is also played out in the interview situation—as if all the responsibility rests on the researcher, for example, in constructing the questions, rather than on the potential difficulty of exploring emotional and personal aspects related to relationships. Thus, by focusing on the external, giving brief references to their feelings, or providing mocking answers to the prepared questions, the participant in a sense takes control throughout the interview. This is particularly interesting because, on a declarative level, the participant might feel that various things or difficulties in their life result from patterns of upbringing, biological conditions, or socio-political pressures.

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4. How to obtain higher-quality data in in-depth qualitative interviews with people living alone? Recommendations based on our experiences

Reflecting on the research process during interviews is a valuable practice. Analyzing the interview protocol, challenging topics, and relational dynamics enhances understanding of the research context and underscores the importance of observation and self-monitoring. This reflection does not always necessitate changes to the protocol but allows for interpreting the data within a social and relational framework.

Based on our reflections on the SEQI protocol, we offer the following recommendations:
- Formulate Neutral Questions: avoid reinforcing social pressure. For instance, instead of asking, "Please tell the story of how you came to be without a life partner?" it is more effective to ask, "Please tell us about your journey to your current life of living alone."
- Avoid Assumptions: do not presume the impact of relationship status on wellbeing. Start with a general question that allows for clarification (cf. Mueller, 2019).
- Include Context: incorporate the social, political, and economic contexts in your questions, such as the effects of the pandemic or issues related to sexual orientation.
- Support Autobiographical Narratives: adjust questions to match varying levels of narrative inclination and assist participants in structuring their responses.

Reflections on interview themes and experiences suggest:
- Clarification and probing: these are essential interventions to enhance data credibility while respecting participants' decisions not to disclose certain details. Recognize that imprecise responses may serve as protective mechanisms, helping participants avoid difficult emotions or feelings of shame.
- Monitor social assumptions: be cautious of creating a sense of familiarity that may lead to complacency in questioning.
- Sensitivity to emotional context: when discussing the future, reduce pressure on participants to respond.
- Flexibility with spontaneous topics: treat spontaneously introduced topics as cues for expanding the protocol.

Analysis of relational patterns highlights the significance of the relational context:

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- Be aware that interviews may bring to light interpersonal challenges for participants, such as difficulties in expressing feelings or meeting needs, as well as rigid relational patterns tied to specific dynamics of control or initiative.
- Apply a relational pattern perspective to comprehend how people living alone function in their lives, linking their statements with observations of interview dynamics.
- Reflect on the researcher's role and the power asymmetry present in the interview, noting participants' strategies (e. g., speaking style).
- Recognize the dynamics of initiative and passivity, which may emerge in both the content of statements and the structure of interactions.
  - Use "here-and-now" observations during the interview (e. g., comment on noticeable changes in the flow of conversation) to gently explore underlying relational dynamics.
  - Reflect and validate feelings: acknowledge participants' silence or hesitations by saying things like, "I notice this is a difficult topic," or "It seems you're taking your time to think about it." This helps participants feel understood and may encourage them to open up more.
  - Employ gentle prompts and open-ended questions: if the participant demonstrates passivity or gives minimal responses, facilitate further elaboration with open-ended questions like, "Could you elaborate on that?" or "How did that experience affect you?" Ensure that this is done without exerting undue pressure.
  - Include relational observations in memo writing: note not only what was said but how it was said and how you experienced the interaction, including non-verbal communication.
- Adding a question about the subjective relational experience at the end of the interview can yield valuable insights regarding the participant's experience of the conversation. A question such as, "How is it for you to participate in such a conversation?" can provide important supplementary information and allow participants to recognize or analyze relational patterns that may have been unconsciously activated.

In conclusion, these recommendations highlight that qualitative interviews are not merely tools for research, but dynamic relational spaces where both the researcher and the participant co-create the exploration of experiences. Reflecting on the construction of the protocol and analyzing topics and relational dynamics emphasize the need to consider both the content of statements and the manner in which they are communicated.

We encourage researchers to view interviews as opportunities to observe interpersonal patterns, both in participants and themselves, thereby enriching the data collected. Being sensitive to the emotional context of questions, being

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flexible in responding to spontaneously introduced topics, and being open to self-reflection on one's role in the research process can enhance research findings while promoting an ethical and empathetic approach to participants. We encourage adopting a research perspective that combines methodological rigor with openness to the relational aspects of the interview, which can inspire further development in qualitative research on the experience of living alone. The next step could involve demonstrating how the complexities of the interview situation may influence the analysis of the collected data.

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Appendix

Highly narrative statements in response to a narrative stimulus

Interview 28

P: Mhm, yes. [Eee] As for being single, it's just something that brings me a lot of joy because I feel very free, unrestrained, not limited in any way. I have also been in longer relationships, even in a six-year-long one recently, [eee] and I just see a huge difference in being able to manage my own time. I don't have to ask anyone for their opinion or, in any way, comply with anyone's wishes, it's not about needing to ask someone else for their opinion or subordinating to someone, but rather that you need to consider the other person's view. And I don't have to do that. I just feel free, making decisions about my time, my space, what I want to do, or how I want to spend that time, whether it's simply a moment when I need solitude. So for me, this is very comfortable. I just feel safe this way. I would say it

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feels completely like this is my place, my way of living. As for the future, I can very much imagine it this way, being single. I mean, "alone" is a somewhat pejorative term, implying something is wrong, but I just find myself in it. I used to have doubts about being single, because the social expectations seem to suggest that one should form a relationship, start a family, have children, but I don't fit into these social expectations in any way and (poor audio quality) for a long time, it was tiring, but after a while (poor audio quality), I realized it's my life, my decisions, and the consequences won't be borne by society, which exerts pressure, but by me. So, I didn't want to follow these expectations. I chose this way of living, though I don't rule out that perhaps it's a matter of maturity and I'm not there yet. I feel my decisions are well thought out and balanced, but maybe I'll find out I was wrong, because one always has to reassess their views. For now, this is how I see it, and I'm almost certain that this will be my life, just in solitude, in quotes "solitude," because, as I said, it's not something I perceive as negative, quite the opposite. I would say that living in independence, yes, that's a very fitting term for me.

Interview 49

P: Hmm, this will be a lot to talk about, but I'll try to be as sensible as I can. I mean, hmm… I come from a family where… I had two parents, but unfortunately, their marriage wasn't very happy. In fact, I may have envied my friends during adolescence and childhood who were raised by, for example, a single father or mother. I unfortunately had two parents. My father lived with us but actually lived his own life, he just came home from work, slept, and then went out somewhere with his own circle of friends. I don't really come from a happy family because my father would throw all of his childhood frustrations, let's say, on my mother and on us, his children. And maybe this is the problem that leads to the pattern of being single because I'm quite afraid of human interactions. I've received a lot of help from therapy, which I was finally able to go to before I turned thirty, because I found a job where I could afford it. The public health service and the national health insurance make it quite difficult to get a therapy appointment. Hmm, in fact, the last long-term relationship I had was between 2011 and 2012. It was, let's say, a repeated pattern from my childhood, where the person didn't have a home. She was alone, had a child she gave birth to at 16, and her family had basically turned their backs on her because she didn't meet their expectations. She also came from a difficult family where there was alcoholism, so our similar life experiences brought us closer. For a year and a half, even though after a few months my family kicked me out because I helped this person. Life threw us around, and we ended up living outside of [big city] in [town]. I commuted to work and drove 90 km every day or every other day to [big city]. I

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helped her and earned money. Maria took care of the house and raising the kids. Then, hmm… I have a feeling, I don't know if it even makes sense to boast about it. Our relationship ended after we had our child together. Unfortunately, not everyone understands, but we decided to part because we had incompatible characters. We both went our separate ways. I didn't want to repeat the pattern of our parents, where people stay together just for the child's sake. It's clear that a child's psyche absorbs bad emotions. Unfortunately, I don't have contact with my child anymore; my parental rights were taken away, so… The mother doesn't want me involved. But I do pay alimony, so that's something, considering how difficult it is to collect alimony in this country. Hmm, well, I've been single for almost 9 years now, renting an apartment and finding work. Relationships, in general, are quite difficult right now, and they might even constitute a sort of educational conflict. I have this conflict because when I search for someone, I would like to be with someone, and if I find them, after 3 or 4 months, I don't know how to say this without sounding silly, but I get a bit bored with them. I'm looking for a sort of constant stimulation. I can't create a long-lasting relationship that would last at least a year. All my relationships end after 3 or 4 months. With people of various ages, mostly people around my age, but there have also been women 8 or 9 years younger than me. I wanted to help them because they came from difficult families too. Now, thanks to therapy, I know I need to take care of myself first, to be well myself, and only then think about others. And for the last 2 or 3 years, I haven't been in any relationships. I limit all my socializing to the internet. To chats like 'Sympatia' or online dating. At work, I'm the only person who is single, everyone else is in long-term relationships or marriages. They meet outside of work. So, outside of work, I'm pretty much alone. The only contacts I have are going to the store or, well, cinemas are closed, but I often go to the pool. So that's pretty much it.

Additional statement about the future

Interview 59

You know, it's hard to say. I have two visions. On one hand, the optimistic vision, where hope isn't entirely lost, because I hope that this year I'll find a girlfriend, because I've also calculated it age-wise. I mean, by the age of 40, I'm 35 now, so within the next 5 years, I'd like to have a wife and children, at least one child, not saying more, yy and, looking back from 40 to today, I imagined it would be good if I managed to get a steady girlfriend this year. Maybe it's all about finding someone, and I hope it will be the right one from the start, but I also assume that even if not, I'll manage to find someone pretty quickly, possibly the one I met. So

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in my perspective, it's about knowing each other for about a year and a half, then engagement, and let's say about another year or two, probably, waiting for the wedding, a church wedding, because I'm a religious person, so that would be important to me, and as I said, starting a family. However, like I said, this is the optimistic version, yy. There's also the pessimistic version. Sometimes I feel it might be more real than the optimistic one, meaning that I might just not find anyone and remain in this status quo. In that case, I can't really say how I'll behave, but I imagine, in the pessimistic version, there will probably be a period of deep breakdown, maybe even depressive states, in the sense that nothing worked out and it's uncertain whether anything will. [….] (U59)

Future conversation (Expansion)

Interview 40

P: (sigh) I don't know. I mean, I have to move first. Maybe when I'm in [big city], I'll start thinking about it, but right now I really can't say anything because… because… since I've never been in any relationships, not even a simple one… I really don't know. I just don't know. Right now, I have no plans or expectations. Maybe, possibly, I'll think about it once I settle in [big city], but who knows. OP: Ah, I understand that you haven't thought about it yet and are postponing the reflection for another time. But for the moment, for the purposes of our interview, how do you imagine the future? How do you see it right now? What comes to mind at the moment? (U40)

"Romantic drought" (Clarification example)

Interview 64

P: […] As for my friends, I initiate contacts, like calling, texting, and so on. But romantically, as I would say, there's a bit of a… drought. I don't know, I also feel that people handle restrictions in different ways, and I try to act a bit more responsibly, and it feels like this is a strange time to go out and meet people. That's all I have to say about that. B: So how do you experience this romantic drought, using your own term?

I: Mm. Well, I feel like it's quite average. I feel like the pandemic is related to it, that's how it seems to me. Of course, I feel lonely living there, working remotely, so there have been days when I didn't talk to anyone except maybe someone in a store, in person, because, for example, no one had time for a video call or anything like that. It seems to me that, when it comes to romantic contacts, it's

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quite hard, because, well, I'm 28, it would be nice to be in a relationship, and it's… Well, I don't know, it's hard, I feel sometimes lonely and sad about it. Yes, that's what I would say.

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Chapter Seven. Religious Attributions Concerning Singlehood: The Development and Validation of A New Scale in Samples of Single Adults

Abstract

This chapter presents the results of two studies conducted with Polish single adults aimed at developing and validating a new research instrument: the Religious Attributions Concerning Singlehood Scale (RACS). This tool was designed to measure how individuals use religious beliefs to interpret their singlehood status. The theoretical foundations of the RACS are based on the principles of General Attribution Theory in the Psychology of Religion and findings obtained from a qualitative interview study. The initial version of the RACS included 23 items, which were tested in two separate studies. In Study 1, which involved 228 single individuals (53.50% of women) aged 20 to 96 years (M = 46.54, SD = 16.8), Principal Component Analysis (PCA) revealed a three-factor structure for the RACS: 1) attributions of God's control over singlehood, 2) negative attributions regarding the meaning and significance of singlehood, and 3) positive attributions regarding the meaning and significance of singlehood. As a result of the PCA, a refined 9-item version of the RACS was developed and validated in Study 2. In Study 2, which involved 290 single individuals (79.70 of whom were women) aged 18 to 72 years (M = 29.70, SD = 7.78), Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) supported the three-factor structure of the RACS. Furthermore, the instrument demonstrated satisfactory reliability, construct validity, as well as convergent, discriminant, and criterion validity. Overall, the results indicate that the RACS is a valid and reliable tool for examining the religious aspects related to interpretations of adult singlehood and its relationship with individuals' psychological functioning.

Keywords: Singlehood; psychology of religion; religious attributions; religious beliefs; religious attributions concerning singlehood

Introduction

Religion plays a significant role in the lives of many individuals around the world. Most people globally identify with a religious tradition (Cooper et al., 2019), and for many, religion influences their decisions regarding relationships, family life, and personal meaning (Zarzycka et al., 2025). Additionally, research has linked

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religion to various psychological benefits, such as increased life satisfaction, better stress coping mechanisms, and improved mental and physical well-being (Cooper et al., 2019). Recently, scholars have shown renewed interest in the role of religion in the experiences of adult singlehood, a subject that has previously received limited attention (see Zarzycka et al., 2026 for a review). This trend is part of broader scientific efforts to understand the factors influencing the psychosocial functioning and well-being of single individuals (e.g., Girme et al., 2023; Ochnik & Adamczyk, 2025).

For instance, Granqvist and Hagekull (2000) found that in a sample of Swedish students, single individuals exhibited higher levels of religious activity and a more personal relationship with God, along with greater religiosity linked to affect regulation and a higher significance placed on religious beliefs. Additionally, Himawan and colleagues (2018a, 2018b) suggested that the adaptive function of religion for single individuals may stem from intrinsic religious orientations, lower levels of negative religious coping, strong attachments to God, and the feeling that the religious community fulfills the individual's need for belonging. However, religion can also have a maladaptive effect on single individuals, potentially leading to negative religious coping. This may cause individuals to focus excessively on religion at the expense of addressing their single status or to dismiss religion as a meaningful aspect of life (Himawan et al., 2018a, 2018b). Finally, recent studies by Adamczyk and colleagues (2024a, 2024b, 2024c) have provided further evidence of both the beneficial and adverse roles of religion and spirituality in the mental health outcomes of single individuals. This review has been further enhanced by the contributions of Girme and colleagues (2023), who have underscored that religion and religious communities represent vital, yet relatively neglected, areas of inquiry within the field of singlehood studies.

In summary, although prior studies have demonstrated both positive and negative impacts of religion on the experiences of adult singlehood (refer to Zarzycka et al., 2025b for a comprehensive review), the specific mechanisms through which religion shapes individuals' interpretations and experiences of singlehood remain inadequately explored (Girme et al., 2023; Zarzycka et al., 2025b). One way to improve our understanding of the connection between religion and life outcomes related to singlehood is by adopting a structural approach to religion. This approach examines beliefs, practices, and personal relationships with the divine that define an individual's religious identity (Hill & Edwards, 2013). It complements the functional approach to religion, which focuses on how religion affects an individual's life by shaping their motivations, coping strategies, and emotional well-being. This includes aspects such as emotional regulation, prayer, religious coping, and spiritual struggles (Hill & Edwards, 2013).

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A structural perspective examines how individuals engage with religion (Hill & Edwards, 2013). One important framework within this perspective is attachment theory, which suggests that people may develop attachment bonds with God, especially when human attachments are either unavailable or insecure. Previous studies have shown that single university students tend to report higher levels of religious activity, a stronger personal connection to God, a greater focus on beliefs, and overall higher religiosity related to emotional regulation compared to their peers in romantic relationships (Granqvist & Hagekull, 2000). Granqvist and Hagekull argue that these findings support the compensatory role of religion, indicating that in the absence of a romantic partner, individuals may seek to form an emotional bond with God to fulfill their psychological need for security and stability.

A specific yet often overlooked structural component related to singlehood is the concept of religious attributions. Originating from cognitive attribution theory (Spilka et al., 1985), religious attributions refer to the tendency to interpret life events as being influenced by divine will or supernatural forces (for example, "God has a plan for me" or "This is a test from God"). Spilka and colleagues (1985) suggest that religious attributions may arise from three key needs or desires: 1) the need to find meaning in world events, 2) the desire to foresee and/or control events, and 3) the need to protect, maintain, and enhance one's self-esteem and self-worth.

It is reasonable to assume that experiencing singlehood, especially in a negative light, can lead to various interpretations, including those related to religion, to explain why one remains single. For example, a single person might believe that their single status is temporary and part of a divine plan, such as thinking, "God has a different plan for me," or that it signifies a spiritual mission, like believing "God needs me to focus on other aspects of life right now." These interpretations can help alleviate distress and build resilience by fostering hope, positively reframing the circumstances, and reinforcing a valued identity. However, not all religious interpretations are beneficial for single individuals. Some views—such as perceiving God as punishing or indifferent—can increase psychological distress and lead to maladaptive coping strategies (Zarzycka, 2023).

Since understanding religious attributions is crucial for exploring singlehood and its related life outcomes, scholars need a reliable and valid instrument to measure religious attributions specifically in relation to singlehood. Existing measures, such as the Religious Attribution Scale (Garey et al., 2017) and the Attribution Toward God Scale (Exline et al., 2011; Zarzycka et al., 2020), do not adequately address ongoing identity-relevant conditions like prolonged singlehood, nor do they encompass the specific theological content that often accompanies such experiences. Given the absence of an appropriate tool in pre-

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vious research, the current study aimed to develop and validate the Religious Attributions Concerning Singlehood Scale (RACS). This new instrument is designed to assess how single individuals perceive and interpret their single status through the lens of their religious beliefs and theological reasoning.

The instrument developed in this study addresses a gap in existing tools by (1) focusing on singlehood as a long-term, existentially meaningful life context, (2) capturing both positive and negative religious attributions specific to this experience, (3) drawing from qualitative and theoretical foundations in the psychology of religion, and (4) undergoing empirical validation in two samples of single adults. This approach extends attributional research to stable life conditions, such as adult singlehood, enriches the understanding of religious meaning-making beyond crisis events, and provides a context-sensitive tool for investigating how religious beliefs relate to the life outcomes of single adults.

Development of the Religious Attributions Concerning Singlehood Scale (RACS)

The development of the RACS began with qualitative, interview-based research conducted by Pietrzak and colleagues (2025) that explored the role of religion in the lives of single individuals. The thematic analysis of the collected data identified three key themes indicating that religion plays a multifaceted role for those who are single: (1) it can be a source of negative experiences associated with being single, (2) it serves as a means of coping with the challenges of singlehood, and (3) it provides a guiding framework for making decisions about choosing future partners and building intimate relationships. Participants' narratives revealed that they often sought religious explanations for their single status, attributed their situation to God's actions or will, and attempted to find meaning in their singlehood through a religious perspective. These findings suggest that the role of religion in singlehood can be effectively understood through the lens of attribution theory. Individuals experiencing singlehood seem to formulate religious attributions—interpretations that link their relationship status to divine causes or spiritual significance. This insight led to the development of a dedicated instrument designed to measure such attributions in a context-sensitive and theoretically grounded manner.

The development of the Religious Attributions Concerning Singlehood Scale (RACS) followed the recommended standards outlined in the literature (e.g., Boateng et al., 2018; Hornowska, 2006; Koenig & Al Zaben, 2021). The creation of the RACS was conducted in two major stages, each consisting of several substages (see Table 1).

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Table 1. Stages of Developing the Religious Attributions Concerning Singlehood Scale (RACS)

Stage 1. Elaboration of the RACS items	Description of the research tasks	Deliveries
1a. Generating a pool of test items	Analysis of the data collected in the qualitative study and analysis of the literature	Generation of a pool of 79 statements
1b. Linguistic analysis of the initial item pool	Verification of test items for grammatical correctness, clarity, and length of terms	Linguistic correction of 79 statements
1c. The first content validity analysis by the method of competent judges	Evaluation of a pool of 79 statements by four competent judges	Selection of 66 statements that received consensus ratings from judges
1d. The second content validity analysis by the method of competent judges	Evaluation of a pool of 66 statements by a new group of nine competent judges	Development of a preliminary 24-item version of the questionnaire
Stage 2. Assessment of the psychometric properties of RACS	Description of the research task	Deliveries
2a. The performance of Study 1	Study 1 conducted by Ariadna Panel on a group of 228 participants	Factor structure analysis and development of a 9-item prefinal version of the questionnaires
2b. The performance of Study 2	Study 2 on a sample of 290 participants recruited through social media	Verification of the factor structure of the questionnaire, assessment of reliability and convergent validity, and discriminant validity

Source: Own elaboration.

The stages and sub-stages of RACS development, shown in Table 1, are explained in detail in the following sections of this chapter.

Elaboration of the RACS items

A preliminary pool of 119 items was created from two primary sources: (1) six items were adapted from established theoretical and measurement frameworks, including the General Attribution Theory for the Psychology of Religion (Spilka et al., 1985) and the Religious Attribution Scale (Garey et al., 2017); (2) 113 items were incrementally developed based on qualitative data collected from a study by Pietrzak and colleagues (2025). After an initial review for clarity and conciseness,

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the collection was narrowed down to 79 items, which then underwent a stylistic and linguistic assessment.

Thirteen items that lacked sufficient inter-rater agreement were excluded, resulting in a total of 66 items. The retained items were categorized according to the attributional motivations proposed by Spilka et al. (1985): (1) need for meaning (26 items), (2) need for control (25 items), and (3) need for self-esteem (15 items). A panel of nine qualified judges, including doctoral students, clinical psychologists, and an advanced psychology student, evaluated each item. They rated the fit of each item with its assigned category on a 0–10 scale. From these ratings, an experimental version of the RACS was developed, consisting of 23 items measured on a 7-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree). Each attribution category included the five highest-rated items and two to three additional items selected for their theoretical relevance based on previous literature (e.g., Exline et al., 2021; Wilt et al., 2023). This version was subsequently reviewed for linguistic clarity by a professional with a degree in Polish philology.

Assessment of the psychometric properties of the RACS

Study 1 investigated the factorial structure of this new instrument using exploratory factor analysis based on Principal Component Analysis (PCA). Subsequently, Study 2 confirmed the factorial structure through confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and evaluated the instrument's internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Study 1 and 2 were not pre-registered. The studies have received a positive evaluation from the Ethics Committee for Research Projects at the Faculty of Psychology and Cognitive Science of Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań (Opinion No.: 2/01/2024).

Study 1. Exploration of the internal structure of the RACS

Method

Participants and procedure

The estimation of the required sample size for conducting an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was based on the general guideline that a sample size ranging from N = 200 to N = 1,000 is adequate for EFA (e.g., Comrey & Lee, 1992). Thus, a sample size of at least N = 200 participants was deemed sufficient for performing an EFA analysis.

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Study 1 was conducted with a sample of 228 single individuals aged between 20 and 96 years (*M* = 46.54, *SD* = 16.80). The sample comprised 122 women (53.50%), 104 men (45.60%), and two non-binary individuals (0.90%). This study was carried out by the Nationwide Research Panel Ariadna in May and June 2024. Detailed information regarding the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants in Study 1, along with the dataset collected, can be found in Table S1 in the supplementary materials available at the Open Science Repository (OSF) at https://osf.io/6wq4n/files/osfstorage.

Methods

Religious Attributions Concerning Singlehood Scale (RACS)

The experimental version of the RACS comprises 23 items that participants rate on a 7-point scale, where 1 indicates "strongly disagree" and 7 indicates "strongly agree."

Sociodemographic Data Questionnaire

Participants filled out a sociodemographic questionnaire that collected information on gender, age, religion, place of residence, education level, whether they have children, sexual orientation, duration of singlehood, marital status (including options such as single, widowed, or divorced), and their desire for a romantic partner.

Results

During the development of the RACS, a three-factor structure was initially proposed based on theoretical considerations. However, since the RACS is a newly developed instrument, we opted to conduct an exploratory factor analysis using Principal Component Analysis (PCA). This approach aims to identify factors that account for the maximum amount of variance in the data (Bedyńska & Cypryańska, 2013). Normality tests conducted on the distribution of all items in the experimental version of the RACS revealed significant deviations from normality. These findings support the use of an extraction method other than maximum likelihood estimation, as the latter assumes multivariate normality (Bedyńska & Cypryańska, 2013).

Horn's method of parallel analysis was used to determine the number of factors to retain. This technique involves comparing the eigenvalues obtained from the actual data with those generated from randomly simulated datasets of the same size. This approach provides a more accurate criterion for factor re-

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tention than the Kaiser rule (Bedyńska & Cypryańska, 2013). To enhance the interpretability and fit of the factor structure with the underlying variables, an oblique (oblimin) rotation was applied. This method allows for correlations between factors, which is a theoretically supported assumption in the context of religious attributions (Bedyńska & Cypryańska, 2013).

The PCA was conducted using Jamovi version 1.16.15. Before the analysis, we assessed the properties of the correlation matrix through two key statistics: the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy and Bartlett's test of sphericity. The KMO value was 0.909, indicating excellent sampling adequacy (Bedyńska & Cypryańska, 2013). Additionally, Bartlett's test yielded a significant result, $\chi^2(253) = 4455.515$, $p < .001$, suggesting that the correlation matrix was not an identity matrix and that the variables shared enough common variance to warrant factor analysis. Table 2 displays the rotated factor matrix, which includes loadings for each of the 23 items in the experimental version of the RACS, following an oblique (Oblimin) rotation. Table 2 also summarizes the total variance explained by the extracted factors using the principal component extraction method.

Table 2. Factor Loadings for the 23 Items of the RACS After Oblimin Rotation, Including Total Variance Explained Using Principal Component Extraction

	Component			
Items	1	2	3	Uniqueness
Item10	**0.919**	-0.031	0.057	0.172
Item11	**0.908**	-0.014	0.083	0.168
Item9	**0.871**	0.012	0.064	0.216
Item16	**0.795**	0.121	0.047	0.242
Item13	**0.656**	0.131	0.309	0.312
Item15	**0.623**	0.233	0.172	0.341
Item17	**0.597**	0.242	-0.478	0.312
Item18	**0.589**	0.149	-0.501	0.378
Item12	-0.237	0.124	0.143	0.937
Item1	-0.348	**0.910**	0.110	0.329
Item20	-0.156	**0.818**	0.123	0.383
Item5	0.224	**0.747**	-0.062	0.239
Item21	0.160	**0.740**	-0.128	0.334
Item4	0.274	**0.689**	0.070	0.226
Item3	0.227	**0.682**	0.087	0.288
Item2	0.299	**0.635**	0.062	0.287
Item19	0.300	**0.614**	-0.059	0.358
Item23	0.424	0.431	-0.281	0.443

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(Continued)

	Component			
Item7	0.158	0.027	**0.858**	0.198
Item6	0.061	0.267	**0.669**	0.375
Item14	0.065	0.322	**0.623**	0.388
Item22	0.364	-0.121	**0.561**	0.574
Item8	0.358	0.361	0.444	0.311
SS Loadings	6.37	5.81	3.01	
% of Variance	27.70	25.30	13.10	

Note. Bold font indicates loadings value above .55, interpreted as a good loading (Comrey & Lee, 1992).

Table 2 presents the results of the PCA, which revealed a three-component solution that collectively accounted for 66% of the total variance. Notably, the variance explained by components 1 and 2 was similar, suggesting that both components contribute equally to the overall structure of the RACS (Bedyńska & Cypryańska, 2013). Based on the overall pattern of results, particularly the factor loadings shown in Table 2 and the underlying theoretical framework, nine items were selected for inclusion in the pre-final version of the RACS.

The interpretation of factor loadings adhered to the criteria proposed by Comrey and Lee (1992): loadings of .71 and above are considered excellent, .63 very good, .55 good, .45 fair, and .32 poor. The items retained in the pre-final version had loadings clustered around .71, .63, and .55, reflecting "excellent," "very good," or "good" psychometric quality in relation to their association with the extracted components. The detailed statistics of the total explained variance after Oblimin diagonal rotation for each of the 23 RACS items can be found in Table S2 of the online supplementary materials available at the Open Science Repository (OSF) at https://osf.io/6wq4n/files/osfstorage.

The selection of items was designed to achieve both conceptual and structural equivalence across the emerging subscales, resulting in three items included in each of the three dimensions. The three components identified through the Principal Component Analysis (PCA) can be understood in psychologically significant ways. The first component (Items 9, 10, 11) reflects religious attributions that emphasize divine control over an individual's singlehood, such as the belief that God actively leads one to a partner (e.g., "God will help me find a partner"). The second component (Items 1, 5, 20) encompasses religious attributions that focus on finding positive meaning and value in being single, viewing singlehood as a purposeful state (e.g., "Singlehood is a vocation for me"). The third component (Items 6, 7, 14) represents negative religious attributions, interpreting singlehood as a burden or divine punishment (e.g., "I see singlehood as a burden sent to me by God").

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The correlation coefficients showed a weak correlation between components 1 and 3 (0.096) and between components 2 and 3 (-0.217), while a strong correlation was found between components 1 and 2 (0.516).

Summary

Study 1 revealed a three-factor structure for the RACS. The results of the Principal Component Analysis confirmed that the RACS effectively captures religious attributions that aim to increase the sense of control over one's single status, as initially hypothesized based on the general theory of attribution in the psychology of religion (Spilka et al., 1985). However, the analysis did not support the existence of a separate factor specifically related to self-esteem enhancement.

Additionally, attributions concerning meaning and significance did not form a unified dimension; instead, they emerged as two distinct components: one reflecting positive religious meaning-making and the other capturing negative religious interpretations of singlehood. The three-component solution identified in the PCA aligns with previous theoretical and empirical research in the psychology of religion. For instance, the identification of two separate dimensions related to meaning—positive and negative—echoes earlier findings that religious attributions are used not only to create meaning in life events (Wilt et al., 2023) but also to evoke feelings of guilt or divine judgment when negative events are interpreted as having been caused by God (Jung, 2015).

Furthermore, researchers in attribution theory emphasize that creating meaning and the effort to predict and control events are two fundamental yet conceptually distinct roles of religious attributions (Spilka et al., 1985). In contrast, the dimension related to self-esteem did not emerge as an independent factor. This absence may be due to the theoretical and empirical complexities surrounding self-esteem within religious contexts. As Hood (1992) pointed out, self-esteem in religious frameworks is often intertwined with a broader range of interrelated constructs—such as guilt, religious commitment, and theological orientation—which can obscure its clear psychometric distinction. This conceptual ambiguity may explain the lack of a distinct attribution factor for self-esteem in this analysis.

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Study 2. Verification of the internal structure of the RACS and its validity

The aim of Study 2 was to verify the three-factor structure of the RACS identified in Study 1 by using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA). Additionally, this study sought to evaluate the construct validity of the RACS, including both convergent and discriminant validity, to provide further evidence supporting the instrument's psychometric robustness.

Convergent validity is recognized as one of the most direct methods for determining the theoretical validity of an instrument (Koenig & Al Zaben, 2021). It involves assessing the correlation between scores on a newly developed scale and scores on established measures that capture related theoretical constructs. To assess the convergent validity of the RACS, we utilized three validated instruments: the Attribution Toward God Scale (Exline et al., 2011), which measures individuals' tendencies to attribute kind or cruel intent to God; the Centrality of Religiosity Scale (Huber, 2003), which assesses the central importance of religion in a person's life; and the Spiritual Well-Being Scale (Paloutzian & Ellison, 1982), which evaluates perceived well-being in relation to one's spiritual beliefs and experiences.

The following hypotheses were proposed regarding the relationship between kind and cruel attributions toward God and various subscales of the RACS.

It was anticipated that positive attributions of meaning and significance, as well as divine control over singlehood, would correlate positively with kind intent attributions toward God. Conversely, these positive aspects were expected to correlate negatively with negative attributions of meaning and significance. For cruel attributions toward God, the opposite pattern was expected: a negative correlation with the positive and divine control subscales, and a positive correlation with the negative attributions subscale. Additionally, a significant positive association was anticipated between the centrality of religiosity and both the positive attributions of meaning and significance and the divine control subscales of the RACS. Conversely, a negative association was expected with negative attributions of meaning and significance. It was also hypothesized that spiritual well-being would exhibit weak to moderate positive correlations with the positive attributions and divine control subscales, while displaying a negative correlation with negative attributions.

To evaluate the discriminant validity of the RACS—defined as its ability to show weak or no associations with conceptually distinct constructs (Koenig & Al Zaben, 2021)—two additional instruments were employed. The first is the Pearlin Mastery Scale (Pearlin & Schooler, 1978), which was adapted to the context of singlehood (Adamczyk, 2024) and measures perceived control over

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one's life circumstances. The second instrument is the Atheism subscale from the Monotheism and Atheism Belief Scale (MABS) (Alsuhibani et al., 2022), translated into Polish by Drążkowski (2024), which assesses atheistic beliefs. It was hypothesized that mastery in singlehood would correlate weakly or not at all with the dimensions measured by the RACS. Similarly, atheism was expected to show weak or no associations with the variables in the RACS, considering their conceptual opposition.

Finally, Study 2 evaluated the criterion validity of the RACS. Criterion validity refers to how well the results of a given instrument correspond with a relevant external criterion, which serves as a standard for assessing the quality and predictive capacity of test scores (Hornowska, 2022). In this study, three psychological variables were selected as criterion measures: depression, psychological well-being, and emotional well-being. These variables were chosen based on the theoretical assumption that indicators of positive mental health are associated with more constructive interpretations of life circumstances. In contrast, negative mental states, such as depressive symptoms, tend to lead to more pessimistic and self-devaluing interpretations. To assess these constructs, two validated instruments were used: the Patient Health Questionnaire-4 (PHQ-4) (Löwe et al., 2010), which measures symptoms of depression and anxiety, and the emotional and psychological well-being subscales of the Mental Health Continuum – Short Form (MHC-SF) (Keyes, 2002).

Method

Participants and procedure

Participants in Study 2 were recruited through invitations posted in Facebook groups aimed at single individuals and through the Catholic Singles Instagram account. Initially, 293 individuals signed up for the study; however, responses from three participants in couples were excluded. Consequently, the final sample included 290 single adults aged between 18 and 72 years (M = 29.70, SD = 7.78), with 231 women (79.70%) and 59 men (20.30%). Detailed information on the sociodemographic characteristics of participants in Study 2, along with the dataset collected, is available at the Open Science Framework repository at https://osf.io/6wq4n/files/osfstorage.

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Methods

Religious Attributions Concerning Singlehood Scale (RACS)

The experimental version of the Religious Attributions Concerning Singlehood Scale (RACS) utilized in this study comprised 9 items. Participants rated the statements on a 7-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating "*strongly disagree*" and 7 indicating "*strongly agree.*" The final original Polish version and its English translation can be found in Appendices A and B.

Centrality of Religiosity Scale (CRS)

The CRS was developed by Stefan Huber in 2003 to assess the significance of religion in an individual's life. Beata Zarzycka adapted the scale into Polish in 2007. The CRS consists of 15 items: items 1–13 are rated on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 indicates "*never*" and 5 signifies "*very often.*" Items 14 and 15 utilize 7-point and 10-point response formats, respectively, to evaluate the frequency of religious practices. The internal consistency of the scale was measured using Cronbach's alpha, which resulted in a value of .85.

Attribution Toward God Scale (AtG)

The AtG, developed by Exline et al. (2011), evaluates two dimensions of religious attributions: kind intent toward God and perceived cruelty from God. The Polish version was adapted by Zarzycka et al. (2020). The scale comprises 19 items, each rated on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*). Both subscales exhibited high internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of .92 for the kind intent subscale and .89 for the cruelty subscale.

Pearlin Mastery Scale (PMS)

The PMS, originally developed by Pearlin and Schooler in 1978 and later adapted by Adamczyk in 2024, is designed to measure an individual's sense of control over their experience of singlehood. This tool consists of seven items, each rated on a 4-point Likert scale, with responses ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). The internal consistency of the scale, assessed using Cronbach's alpha, yielded a score of .76.

Monotheism and Atheism Belief Scale (MABS)

The Atheism subscale from the MABS, developed by Alsuhibani et al. (2022) and translated into Polish by Drążkowski (2024), assesses atheistic beliefs. This subscale consists of seven items, with respondents indicating their level of agreement on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The internal consistency of the subscale was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, yielding a result of .60.

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Patient Health Questionnaire-4 (PHQ-4)

The PHQ-4 is a brief screening tool developed by Löwe and colleagues (2010) and adapted into Polish by Larionow and Mudło-Głagolska (2023). It was used to assess symptoms of anxiety and depression. The PHQ-4 consists of four items—two related to anxiety and two related to depression—each rated on a 4-point scale, ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 3 (*almost every day*). The internal consistency for both subscales is as follows: $\alpha = .88$ for the anxiety subscale and $\alpha = .82$ for the depression subscale.

Mental Health Continuum—Short Form (MHC-SF)

The MHC-SF, developed by Keyes in 2002 and adapted into Polish by Karaś and colleagues in 2014, was utilized to measure psychological, emotional, and social well-being. The scale consists of 14 items rated on a 6-point scale from 0 (*never*) to 6 (*daily*). For the study, two of the three subscales were employed: the psychological well-being subscale and the emotional well-being subscale. Both subscales exhibited high internal consistency, with $\alpha = .92$ for psychological well-being and $\alpha = .93$ for emotional well-being.

Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWBS)

The Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWBS), developed by Paloutzian and Ellison in 1982 and adapted into Polish by Zarzycka et al. in 2024, was utilized to measure spiritual well-being. The scale consists of 11 items, each rated on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (strongly *agree*). The internal consistency of the scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a result of .93.

Sociodemographic Data Questionnaire

Participants filled out a sociodemographic questionnaire that included their gender, age, religion, place of residence, education level, whether they have children, sexual orientation, duration of singlehood, marital status (i. e., single, widowed, or divorced), and desire for a romantic partner.

Results

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed using Jamovi software (version 1.6.15). For comparison purposes, a one-factor model was also tested. Table 3 presents the results of the CFA, including five commonly used fit indices that evaluate how well the tested model aligns with the observed data.

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Table 3. Indices for the Three-factor and One-factor Models of the 9-Item Religious Attributions Concerning Singlehood Scale (RACS)

						RMSEA 90% CI	
Model	χ^2 (24)	CFI	TLI	SRMR	RMSEA	Lower	Upper
3-factor	80.90***	0.916	0.874	0.700	0.090	0.069	0.112
1-factor	562***	0.209	-0.054	0.185	0.261	0.243	0.280

Note. CFI = Comparative Fit index; TLI = Tucker Lewis Index; RMSEA = Root Mean Squared Error of Approximation; SRMR = Standardized Root Mean Square Residual.
*** $p < .001$.

The model fit indices presented in Table 3 indicate that the chi-square test was statistically significant, suggesting there is a discrepancy between the model and the observed data. However, the chi-square statistic is highly sensitive to sample size; as the sample size increases, the likelihood of detecting even trivial misfit also increases (Browne & Cudeck, 1993; Clark & Bowles, 2018). Therefore, it is recommended to rely on additional fit indices. For the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and the Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI), values above .90 are typically interpreted as indicative of acceptable model fit, while values exceeding .95 reflect excellent fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999; West et al., 2012).

Although the RMSEA value for the three-factor model is .090, which exceeds the commonly accepted limit for acceptable fit, more recent methodological studies suggest that this indicator may overstate the mismatch in models with low degrees of freedom, especially in moderate or large sample sizes (Kenny et al., 2014). The model contains only 24 degrees of freedom, which may explain the elevated RMSEA. Additionally, other key fit indices—particularly the CFI (.916) and the SRMR (.070)—are within acceptable limits, supporting the overall accuracy of the three-factor model. As recommended in the literature, the interpretation of model fit should consider the overall performance pattern of all indicators rather than relying solely on the RMSEA (Marsh et al., 2004).

Taken together, the CFA indices for the three-factor model suggest that the RACS measurement model demonstrates a good overall fit to the data. In contrast, the one-factor model showed a substantially poorer fit, indicating that the three-factor structure provides a significantly better representation of the data.

Convergent validity of the RACS

To assess convergent validity, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated between the three dimensions of the RACS and the external constructs mentioned earlier. The correlation matrix is provided in Table S4 of the online supplementary materials available at the Open Science Framework at https://osf.io/6wq4n/files/osfstorage.

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The correlation coefficients were interpreted following the guidelines proposed by Bedyńska and Cypriańska (2013): values of $r \leq .30$ indicate a weak correlation, r between .31 and .50 indicates a moderate correlation, and $r \geq .51$ indicates a strong correlation.

The correlation analysis confirmed the convergent validity of the RACS. Specifically, the centrality of religiosity (CRS) showed a positive correlation with positive attributions of meaning and significance related to singlehood (RACS) ($r = .35$, $p < .001$) and with attributions of divine control over singlehood (RACS) ($r = .15$, $p < .05$). Conversely, it exhibited a negative correlation with negative attributions of meaning and significance associated with singlehood (RACS) ($r = -.22$, $p < .001$).

The attributions of kind intent toward God (AtG) were positively correlated with positive attributions of meaning and significance of singlehood (RACS) ($r = .34$, $p < .001$) and attributions of divine control over singlehood (RACS) ($r = .21$, $p < .001$). In contrast, they negatively correlated with negative attributions of meaning and significance of singlehood (RACS) ($r = -.22$, $p < .001$). Conversely, attributions of cruelty toward God (AtG) negatively correlated with positive attributions of meaning and significance of singlehood (RACS) ($r = -.25$, $p < .001$) and attributions of divine control over singlehood (RACS) ($r = -.12$, $p < .05$). They were positively correlated with negative attributions of meaning and significance of singlehood (RACS) ($r = .37$, $p < .001$).

Spiritual well-being (SWBS) demonstrated positive correlations with positive attributions of meaning and significance of singlehood (RACS) ($r = .39$, $p < .001$) and with attributions of divine control over singlehood (RACS) ($r = .30$, $p < .001$). Additionally, it showed negative correlations with negative attributions of meaning and significance of singlehood (RACS) ($r = -.42$, $p < .001$).

These results confirm both the partial convergence and the distinctiveness of the constructs studied. Overall, religious attributions regarding singlehood are linked to religiosity and spiritual well-being, but they are not identical. Furthermore, attributions of kind intent toward God and attributions of cruelty toward God are related to religious attributions concerning singlehood since they refer to God but explain different situations.

Discriminant validity of the RACS

The correlation analysis confirmed the discriminant validity of the RACS . Most of the initially hypothesized weak correlations, or the absence of correlations, have been verified.

A sense of control over one's singlehood, measured by the Pearlin Mastery Scale, showed a positive correlation with positive attributions of meaning and

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significance of singlehood as assessed by RACS ($r = .20$, $p < .001$). It was not significantly associated with attributions of God's control ($r = -.06$, not significant) and had a negative correlation with negative attributions of meaning and significance of singlehood (RACS) ($r = -.38$, $p < .001$). The latter correlation is of moderate strength, which contradicts previous hypotheses that suggested a weak or nonexistent correlation. This outcome is not entirely surprising, as individuals who believe they have control over their singlehood are less likely to attribute the reasons for not having a partner to God.

Furthermore, atheism, as measured by the Monotheism and Atheism Belief Scale, showed a negative correlation with positive attributions of meaning and significance of singlehood (RACS) ($r = -.19$, $p < .001$). It was not significantly related to attributions of divine control of singlehood (RACS) ($r = -.05$, not significant) and demonstrated a positive correlation with negative attributions of meaning and significance of singlehood (RACS) ($r = .26$, $p < .001$).

Criterion validity of the RACS

The correlation matrix between the three constructs measured by the RACS and the three criterion variables is presented in Table S5 in the online supplementary materials available via the Open Science Framework at https://osf.io/6wq4n/files/osfstorage.

The analysis indicated that most of the correlations observed in Study 2 aligned with our theoretical expectations. Specifically, depression (measured by the PHQ-4) was negatively associated with positive attributions of meaning and significance regarding singlehood (RACS) ($r = -.12$, $p < .05$), while it was positively associated with negative attributions of meaning and significance of singlehood (RACS) ($r = .28$, $p < .001$).

In contrast, both psychological well-being and emotional well-being (measured using the MHC-SF) showed positive correlations with positive attributions of meaning and significance of singlehood (RACS) ($r = .18$ and $r = .19$, respectively; both $p < .01$) as well as with attributions of God's control over singlehood (RACS) ($r = .17$ and $r = .22$, respectively; both $p < .01$). They were also negatively correlated with negative attributions of meaning and significance of singlehood (RACS) ($r = -.30$ and $r = -.35$, respectively; both $p < .001$). However, the anticipated negative association between depression and attributions of God's control over singlehood was not supported by the data ($r = -.07$, not significant). These results suggest that the content of religious beliefs can be related to overall well-being.

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Summary

Study 2 provided additional psychometric support for the Religious Attributions Concerning Singlehood Scale (RACS) by confirming its three-factor structure through confirmatory factor analysis and demonstrating acceptable internal consistency within its subscales. The study also established convergent validity by showing consistent theoretical associations between the RACS subscales and measures of religiosity and spiritual well-being. Weak or negligible correlations with unrelated constructs, such as atheism and mastery, supported discriminant validity. Furthermore, criterion validity was confirmed through associations with mental health indicators: positive religious attributions were linked to greater well-being, whereas negative religious attributions were associated with higher levels of depression. These findings indicate that the RACS is a reliable and valid tool for capturing religious cognitive interpretations of singlehood.

General discussion

The current investigation aimed to develop and validate a new tool called the Religious Attributions Concerning Singlehood Scale (RACS) to assess religious interpretations of singlehood. In two studies, strong support was found for the tool's psychometric quality and theoretical relevance. Notably, Study 1 confirmed that a three-factor model provided the best fit for the data, demonstrating adequate internal consistency across the subscales. These findings offer robust evidence for the factorial validity of the RACS and support its use in future research related to religion and relationship status.

The pattern of correlations observed in Study 2 between the RACS subscales and external measures of religiosity—such as the centrality of religiosity, spiritual well-being, and attributions toward God—further confirmed the scale's convergent validity. As predicted, individuals who attributed kind intentions to God and reported higher levels of religiosity and spiritual well-being were more likely to adopt positive interpretations of singlehood from a religious perspective. In contrast, those with higher levels of cruel attributions or lower spiritual well-being tended to endorse negative religious interpretations more frequently. These findings align with theoretical frameworks that emphasize the importance of religion in shaping meaning around significant life experiences (Hill & Pargament, 2003; Spilka et al., 1985). The RACS exhibited discriminant validity, indicating only weak or negligible correlations with general psychological constructs like mastery and atheism. This finding suggests that the scale is focused on a specific type of religious meaning-making rather than encompassing broader cognitive or ideological trends.

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The observed connections between RACS scores and mental health indicators provide further evidence of the scale's criterion validity. Positive religious attributions were associated with higher levels of psychological and emotional well-being, which aligns with previous research demonstrating the protective effects of adaptive religious coping and belief systems (Pargament, 2010; Koenig & Al Zaben, 2021). Conversely, negative religious attributions were related to increased levels of depression and lower well-being, highlighting the psychological costs associated with maladaptive religious interpretations. These findings emphasize the dual potential of religious attributions: they can either foster or impede individual adjustment, depending on their nature and purpose.

The results indicate that the RACS is a valid and theoretically grounded tool for exploring how individuals interpret and cope with singlehood in relation to their religious beliefs. It addresses a significant gap in existing literature by providing a context-sensitive measure that reflects the lived experiences of single adults, particularly in societies where religion is an important cultural and personal framework.

While the current studies provide promising evidence of the RACS's psychometric reliability and theoretical relevance, there are several limitations that should be acknowledged.

First, the data were collected exclusively through self-report measures in online surveys, which may introduce response biases, such as social desirability or self-selection effects. Future research should consider using multimethod approaches, including behavioral indicators or informant reports, to validate the construct in a wider range of contexts.

Second, while the sample included a broad age range, it was predominantly composed of women and Christian participants. Therefore, the generalizability of the findings to men or individuals from other religious or secular backgrounds remains limited. Subsequent studies should aim to replicate and extend these conclusions in more religiously and culturally diverse populations, potentially using comparative or cross-national designs.

Third, the relatively brief length of each RACS subscale (three items) may limit the estimates of internal consistency, as shorter scales are statistically less likely to achieve high reliability coefficients. Nonetheless, the theoretical coherence and consistent correlational patterns support the interpretability of the results. Future research could explore expanded versions of the subscales or attempt item refinement to enhance reliability while maintaining conceptual clarity.

Despite these limitations, the RACS fills an important gap in the literature by providing a theoretically grounded, empirically validated tool for studying religious meaning-making in the context of singlehood. It holds promise for future research in the psychology of religion, identity development, and adult relational experiences.

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Appendix A

The English version of the Religious Attributions Concerning Singlehood Scale (RACS)

Please answer the following questions concerning religion and singlehood using the 7-point scale below. Respond to each statement by indicating how much you agree or disagree with it.

1 = strongly disagree
2 = disagree
3 = rather disagree

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4 = I have no opinion
5 = rather agree
6 = I agree
7 = strongly agree

1. Singlehood is a form of vocation for me.
2. God has made me live single because of the evil I have done
3. I believe that God has already chosen a partner for me whom I will meet someday.
4. I see singlehood as a burden sent to me by God.
5. God will make me find a partner.
6. God does not want me to be in a relationship.
7. God wants me to wait for the right partner/partner.
8. Singlehood is an opportunity for my spiritual growth.
9. God could not have planned anything better for me than singlehood.

Scoring:
Subscale 1: *Positive meaning and significance:* Questions no. 1, 8 and 9
Subscale 2: *Negative meaning and significance:* Questions no. 2, 4 and 6
Subscale 3: *Sense of control: Questions* no. 3, 5 and 7

Appendix B

The Polish version of the Religious Attributions Concerning Singlehood Scale (RACS)

Skala Atrybucji Religijnych dotyczących Życia w Pojedynkę (SARdŻwP)

Poniżej zostały przedstawione stwierdzenia dotyczące religii i życia w pojedynkę. Do każdego z podanych stwierdzeń ustosunkuj się na skali 7-stopniowej:

1 = zdecydowanie nie zgadzam się
2 = nie zgadzam się
3 = raczej nie zgadzam się
4 = nie mam zdania
5 = raczej zgadzam się
6 = zgadzam się
7 = zdecydowanie zgadzam się

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1. Życie w pojedynkę jest dla mnie formą powołania.
2. Bóg sprawił, że żyję w pojedynkę z powodu zła, które wyrządziłem
3. Wierzę, że Bóg już wybrał mi partnera / partnerkę, którego / którą kiedyś spotkam.
4. Postrzegam życie w pojedynkę jako ciężar zesłany mi przez Boga.
5. Bóg sprawi, że znajdę partnera / partnerkę.
6. Bóg nie chce, bym był w związku.
7. Bóg chce, żebym poczekał na właściwego partnera / partnerkę.
8. Życie w pojedynkę jest szansą dla mojego rozwoju duchowego.
9. Bóg nie mógłby zaplanować dla mnie nic lepszego niż życie w pojedynkę.

Klucz odpowiedzi:
Podskala 1 *Pozytywny sens i znaczenie:* Pytania nr 1, 8 i 9
Podskala 2 *Negatywny sens i znaczenie:* Pytania nr 2, 4 i 6
Podskala 3 *Poczucie kontroli:* Pytania nr 3, 5 i 7

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