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Singled Out: How Singles are Stereotyped, Stigmatised and Ignored, and Still Live Happily Ever After by Bella DePaulo, New York, St Martins Griffin, 2006. 325pp. \$14.95 U. S. /\$17.25 Can (paperback). ISBN-10: 0-312-34082-6

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The steady flow of published accounts and studies on the single life since the 19th century is testament that the single status continues to preoccupy the interest of scholars and layperson alike. What is it about singleness that excites such passion and puzzle? Historians, social psychologists, sociologists and above all novelists have struggled to explain the very existence of the single person, to reveal the strong social constraints imposed by marriage, motherhood and domesticity on women's lives in particular and to explore the cultural context in which single women were regarded as a 'problem', 'redundant' and even 'superfluous'. Published anonymously in 1852, an early account of the single life, *Single Blessedness: Or Single Ladies and Gentleman Against the Slanders of the Pulpit, Press and Lecture Room* was written to refute inadequate explanations for the existence of the 'single class' and to demonstrate that single people 'can speak for ourselves'; the author asserting the right to be single if one wishes. That right continues to be asserted but to what avail?

Historical accounts demonstrate the impressive contribution of 'superfluous women' to social change in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In a review of the contribution of unmarried women to the development of the welfare state, to educational, employment and moral reform, Gordon (1994) unequivocally states that 'spinsters formed the backbone of feminism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century' (p. 14) and were influential in improving the social position of women. Vicinus (1985), while acknowledging the welfare, health and educational contribution of single women to changing social legislation in Britain comments that without an economic base, women were much less effective in influencing the organisation of industry, the church, the military and the government itself (see p. 285). Arguably the transformation of these structures of power require not only the presence of women but a fundamental shift in the ideological basis which privileges male over female. In spite of notable social reform activity, contribution to the labour force and key to family support, the state of being unmarried was persistently regarded as unwomanly and unhealthy, single women being

perceived as socially and sexually at odds with the rest of the community (Adams, 1976; Auchmuty, 1975; Chambers-Schiller, 1984; Jeffreys, 1985; Vicinus, 1985; Froide, 2005; Holden, 2007; Bell and Yans-McLaughlin, 2008).

Many books on single women published prior to the 1970s were often not based on empirical research but were written with the intention of informing society about the position and circumstances of single women (the RCHA bibliography referenced below cites 124 such titles ranging from the 1700s to the present day). Texts attempted to explain why some women did not marry, explanations oscillating between personal characteristics and social factors, between choice and constraint. Unmarried women were cast by some commentators as rebels resisting the imperative of marriage preferring to be involved in socio-political reform; or they were cast as unfortunate victims of poor parenting practices or witnesses to unsuccessful or violent marriages; as suffering from an excess of narcissism, homosexuality or overdeveloped superegos; as being compelled to care for parents or other family members or simply casualties of an era when the problem of 'superfluous' women was at its most pressing. Other texts gave advice to the unmarried on how to live a meaningful life, despite the exigencies of their circumstances, and all were concerned that society be better informed about the lives of 'never-married' women. The 1980s and 1990s are characterized by the publication of an expanding range of 'self-help' texts for single women and men either offering positive affirmations and practical solutions for a satisfying single life (Clements, 1998) to identifying the necessary ten steps to marriage (Kent, 1988).

Much of the early empirically-based research is on characteristics of the single female population: single women being more likely to be described as independent, upwardly mobile, well-educated, financially secure, ambitious and lower rates of mental illness, for example (Bernard, 1972; Gove, 1972; Spreitzer and Reilly, 1974; Cargan and Melko, 1982; LevySimon, 1987). Regarding marriage as the usual choice of adult society, many empirical studies present the single status as 'deviant', describing the characteristics of single people and their responses to this so-called deviant status (Adams, 1976; Keith 1980; LevySimon, 1987; Allen, 1989). Other studies attempt to move beyond a homogeneous treatment of single people and devise categories or typologies 'to better understand' the attitudes and values informing the single lifestyle (Stein, 1976; Gordon, 1994). The interior landscape of the 'single personality' was mined by more psychological and psychoanalytical approaches which measured varying levels of personality fulfillment and self-esteem among the 'never-married' (Baker, 1968; Blanchard, 1985). Psychological studies were concerned with adult-child relations, developmental maturity, personal characteristics and the single status (Enoch, 1987; Dougherty, 1988). Single people are compared to married people, women to men and the suitability of applying conventional male or female models of adult development to scrutinise the maturation process of single people are common topics (Bonds White, 1987; Jagers, 1987; Lange, 1987). The import of many of these studies is that personal adjustment to the single status is possible and many single people lead

happy, contented and fulfilled lives, despite the long shadow cast by marriage. It is also clear that the single person is perceived by society and science as occupying a tensionful location: the choice to be single, the single lifestyle and identity is regarded by others as not the usual choice of mature adults and requires substantial explanation, investigation and validation.

Studies of singlehood as a viable, acceptable social identity for adulthood and as a lifestyle option are relatively recent, emerging only in the US in the late 1960s while similar European-based studies are now beginning to emerge (DePaulo and Morris 2005; Mcvarish, 2006; Simpson, 2006; Trimmerger, 2006; Reynolds, 2008). In parallel, the field of Singleness Studies is slowly developing. Singleness is being utilized as a primary organizing construct in research rather than a sub-category of 'marital' status. Studies of singlehood prompt researchers to reflect on and examine taken-for-granted use of 'ready-made' analytical categories (DePaulo and Morris 2005). A burgeoning contemporary academic literature on singleness, reflected in the development of extensive on-line bibliographies is evidence of a multi-disciplinary interest from a broad church of scholars (see for example the bibliographies of the Rutgers Centre for Historical Analysis <http://www.rcha.rutgers.edu/>, the Scholars of Single Women Network <http://www.medusanet.ca/singlewomen/>, and Bella DePaulo's bibliography at <http://issc.berkeley.edu/singlesstudies/bibliography.html>).

A look at the Scholars of Single Women Network website shows that a number of undergraduate courses on singleness are beginning to appear on third level programmes, as is dedicated funding for research, along side a growing number of conferences and seminars on singleness (see for example the 2006 Annual Conference of the UK based Women's History Network on Single Women in History 1000-2000 <http://humanities.uwe.ac.uk/swhisnet/proq2006.htm>). Singleness continues to be a topic of investigation for post-graduate students not only in Europe, the US, Canada and Australia but worldwide. Professional associations devoted to singleness as well as welfare and advocacy groups for single people continue to develop. Special issues of academic journals target singleness as a topic for inquiry (see for example *Psychological Inquiry*, 16, 2&3, 2005; *Sociological Research Online*, 11, 3).

The accent on stigma and the constant comparison of single people to married people that has dominated the conceptualisation and analysis of singlehood is also being contested (Macvarish, 2006). It is into this terrain that DePaulo ably steps as she investigates the cause and consequences of the persistence of anti-single bias. *Singled Out* hinges on the exploration of two related concepts, *singlism* and *matrimania*, coined by DePaulo to raise consciousness about the 'myths and misbehaviors' towards singles in science and society. The privileging of marriage and coupledness and not singleness is robustly named by DePaulo as the persistent, pernicious and perfidious problem. For DePaulo, singlism is a consequence of 'uncontested' set of beliefs, drawn from the ideology of marriage and family that privileges peer relationships based on sexual partnership over other kinds of relationships. Those who have such partnerships are therefore deemed happier and more

fulfilled than those who do not. Both science and society, she argues, are influenced by singlism.

Her book will be of wide and general interest to 'gender' and 'family' scholars and also to single people whose everyday lives are diminished and relational choices delegitimised by the normative social expectations that privilege coupledness and marriage. Many of the accounts of the false perception or poor treatment of singles in this book will be familiar to single people. The stories and empirical evidence may also cause family, friends, employers and even strangers who wittingly or unwittingly employ singlism, to pause and reflect on their own exclusive support for coupledness and marriage. The open, accessible, humorous, story based style employed by DePaulo will amuse and annoy, as the detailed argument interspersed with anecdote and thoughtful observation drawn from a wide range of sources and personal experiences reveal the persistent enthusiasm for couple culture and the consequent chronic stigmatization of women and men precisely because they are single. DePaulo vehemently and persistently argues her case and identifies the pernicious consequences of the constant social, cultural, political, legal and economic discrimination that befalls men and women if they are not in a 'serious' coupled heterosexual relationship, asking the reader to reflect on why this is the case.

Organized into fifteen chapters with index, notes and an extensive up to date bibliography the book engages with various myths about 'sad, bad or mad' singles. Though the case of single women has dominated singles research, DePaulo adopts a more inclusive approach giving men and single people with children a chapter of their own. Her aim is not to solely point out the injustices meted against single people but to interrogate research evidence regarding supposed 'marital superiority' in terms of health, happiness, longevity, life satisfaction or any emotional, physical or interpersonal characteristic that one can care to name. For DePaulo single and married people are more similar than different and most single people live happy and contented lives but their 'successfully single' stories are largely untold and unheard. The intolerance shown towards singles who eschew marriage and children displays a societal fear of diversity despite the numerical superiority of single people in western populations and their move to achieve significant personal, economic and political power. DePaulo writes that the privileging of the institution of marriage ensures a multitude of dividends transferred to married people, often at the expense of single people. This restrictive privileging she argues, must end. One of the reasons that successfully single stories have been less heard is that they are interpreted as being anti-marriage and disturb the cultural and religious consensus concerning the special value and moral superiority of marriage. DePaulo concludes her account with an outline of her vision for a new society in which citizens are treated equally, respectfully and with fairness regardless of their uncoupled or coupled state.

Examining with seriousness of purpose, the deeply held beliefs and practices that give rise to institutional and personal bias against singles and the concomitant 'glorifying' of compulsory coupledness is for DePaulo an act of

liberation. Whether or not you agree with her use and interrogation of evidence and argumentative style, the work is a significant and compelling contribution to Singleness Studies research. While DePaulo has critically contributed to academic inquiry concerning singleness here and elsewhere (DePaulo and Morris, 2005), this book appealing to a broader audience is written to alter scientific and social consciousness regarding singleness. *Singled Out* is based on the hope that like *Single Blessedness* it too will reduce negative evaluations of singles, prompting society to re-think attitudes towards marriage, giving equal prominence to singlehood as a civil status choice. Perhaps its time has finally come and singleness will no longer be perceived as a threat to marriage but rather a rich resource helping to shape a diversity of family forms and communities of choice in more tolerant societies. DePaulo's work is a noteworthy and eloquent contribution to this endeavour.

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