

Single Subject Research: Applications in Educational Settings

A reader just emailed to ask about my definition of "single." I thought I'd send her a link to a relevant post. I was surprised to discover that, even though I've been blogging here since March of 2008, I've never written a post on the meaning of "single." So in this post, I will:

Describe my three definitions of "single" Republish an excerpt of an interview with Jaclyn Geller, in which I asked her whether "single" is even the right word to use Share an excerpt from the introduction to Singled Out, in which I discussed the meaning of "single," and Invite you to suggest other definitions of "single" (your own or other people's) and add your thoughts on whether "single" is the best term to use

1. My Three Senses of "Single"

I think of "single" in three different ways, which often overlap. You can be legally single, socially single, or personally single.

You are legally single if you are not legally married. This is of tremendous consequence in the United States, as a whole treasure trove of protections and privileges come with legal marriage. (That's one of the reasons why same-sex marriage is pursued with such intensity.) Also, some of the people in your life might think it matters whether you are legally married. Maybe you have been part of a committed couple for decades, but unless you made your union official and legal, you still count as legally single.

You are socially single if you are not in a romantic relationship that other people regard as serious. This is a much more slippery matter than the legal definition. In our article, "The unrecognized stereotyping and discrimination against singles," Wendy Morris and I noted that "impressions of seriousness are shaped by factors such as the length of time the twosome has been together, the regularity and exclusivity with which they see each other, whether they seem to intend to stay together, and whether they live together." Whether other people see you as part of a couple (your social status) can be even more significant to your everyday life, and how other people treat you, than your legal status.

You are personally single if you think of yourself as single. Usually, if other people see you as coupled, you do, too. But not always. Sometimes other people think you are Jack-and-Jill but you see yourself as Jack. Or as Jill. Maybe there were two people out to fetch a pail of water, but you climbed that damned hill yourself! (Or with a little help from your friends.)

2. What Shall We Be Called? Jaclyn Geller's Thoughts

When I interviewed Jackie Geller for this blog (here and here and here), she offered some intriguing thoughts on the topic. Here's an excerpt from our conversation:

Bella: I think I first learned that "spinster" once had a positive meaning from reading *Here Comes the Bride*. Want to tell us about that? Is that the word you

think we should use to refer to single women?

Jaclyn: Bella, I respect your work tremendously, and I know you use the word "single," as many people do. I myself have trouble with that term, and I don't use it anymore. I don't like the "single"/ "married" binary. It implies that any unmarried person is a fragmentary half-self awaiting completion in a spouse. It suggests that all other partnerships â€” including the close friendships that sustain so many people, especially women â€” do not factor into one's self-definition.

A woman who shares her life with a few long-term close partners, one of whom might be a lover, but who has no marriage license, is considered "single." If she marries a man she's known for two weeks in a Las Vegas chapel she's suddenly no longer "single;" she's married â€” de facto, socially complete. It's a strange way of rating people. It's very counterintuitive.

I think there are many terms that would better serve us. In her excellent book, *Beyond (Straight and Gay) Marriage*, Nancy D. Polikoff suggests a few different phrases: "valuing all families;" "intra-dependent." In my book, I suggest reviving the term "spinster," which in England, before the onset of the modern marriage mystique, just meant a financially independent woman who supported herself by spinning â€” by manufacturing textiles. The term is so negative, at this point, that it's probably one few women will want to embrace, so "spinster by choice" might be better.

Another term I suggest, in my most recent column for the Alternative to Marriage Project, is "unconventionally partnered." That's what I write on medical forms when I visit the dentist or doctor. Despite the marriage mania that's all around us, I think we're in an interesting period of transition when many people are rejecting or at least questioning matrimony. People will experiment with new words and find the language that feels consonant with the ways they're setting up their lives.

3. Discussion of the Meaning of "Single," from *Singled Out* (pp. 3-5):

I would like to clarify what I mean by single, but I cannot do so without first explaining what it means to have a serious partner. That, too, is part of the problem: Single people are defined negatively, in terms of what they do not have â€” a serious partner. They are labeled as "unmarried." But it is singlehood that comes first and then is undone

â€” if it is undone â€” by marriage. So why aren't married people called "unsingle?" Back to the serious coupled relationship. Marriage is the gold standard. If you are married, you have your serious partner. It does not matter if you are happy or miserable, faithful or philandering, whether you live in the same home as your partner or on different continents. If you have the certificate, and you are not in the process of tearing it up, you are official. Official marriage matters. Only the legal version of marriage comes with the guaranteed treasure trove of perks, privileges, rewards, and responsibilities. Access to another adult's Social Security benefits, their health care plan, their hospital room, or their life-sustaining feeding tube can all turn on whether you are legally married. When the Census Bureau counts married people, they are counting the official kind. Legally single people, then, are adults who are not officially married. They include people who are divorced and widowed as well as people who have always been single. More important to the texture of your everyday life is whether or not you are socially single or socially coupled. Once again, if you are married, you automatically count as coupled. Beyond that, the criteria are more slippery. People try to discern your coupled status from a hodgepodge of clues. Do you seem to be in a romantic relationship with another person? How long have you been with that person? Do you seem to expect to stay together? Are you living together? One question that does not matter much to the social coupling criterion is whether your pair consists of one man and one woman. Straights, gays, bisexuals, and transsexuals can all count as socially coupled if they are in a certain kind of relationship with another person. Sex is the component that conventionally distinguishes the coupled relationship from every other close relationship, even if that component has not yet been realized or if its practice is a vague and distant memory. (Of course, sex alone is not sufficient. A one-night stand is not a coupled relationship â€” it is just a fling.) In trying to discern who really is socially coupled, we are less likely to wonder about the couple's practice of sex than about their approximation to an image, a romantic ideal. The image is two people looking lovingly into each other's eyes, no one else in the picture, the background gauzy and ethereal. In song, the notion is captured by the titles that all sound so similar, such as Nat King Cole or Jerry Vale's "You're My Everything," Elvis Presley's "There Goes My Everything," or Andy Gibb's "I Just Want to Be Your Everything." In lyrics, the romantic ideal is Leann Rimes asking, "How do I live without you? You are my world, my heart, my soul." Serious partners, in our current cultural fantasy, are the twosomes who look to each other for companionship, intimacy, caring, friendship, advice, the sharing of the tasks and finances of household and family, and just about everything else. They are the repositories for each other's hopes and dreams. They are each other's soul mates and sole mates. They are Sex and Everything Else Partners. Now I can explain what single means: You don't have a serious partner. The simple distinction, you have a serious partner or you don't, maps onto the golden rule of singlism, the way of thinking that has become the conventional wisdom of our time: You have a serious partner or you lose. If you are single, then, you lose by definition. No matter what you can point to on your own behalf â€” spectacular

accomplishments, a lifelong and caring convoy of relatives and friends, extraordinary altruism — none of it redeems you if you have no soulmate. Others will forever be scratching their heads and wondering what's wrong with you and comparing notes (he's always been a bit strange; she's so neurotic; I think he's gay). It is like having a gymnastics routine lacking a key element that qualifies it for a perfect score; no matter how skillfully and gracefully you perform your routine, it will always be judged as lacking. Serious partner or no serious partner must sound awfully simplistic. Surely, the many significant distinctions must matter somehow. Among those without a serious partner, for example, there are single men and single women (always a distinction worth pondering); people who have always been single and those who are divorced or separated or widowed; young singles and old singles, rich singles and poor singles; singles who have children and singles who do not; singles who live in the city and singles who live in the suburbs or the countryside; coastal singles and Midwestern singles; singles living alone and singles living with others; smug singles and singles pining for partners; and singles of different races, ethnicities, and religions, to name just a few. These kinds of distinctions do matter. Some singles are stigmatized more relentlessly and unforgivingly than others. The many varieties of singlehood, rather than creating hopeless complexity, can actually be sorted out with two simple rules. First, all of the existing prejudices remain in place. For example, since men still typically trump women, feminism notwithstanding, single men will have an easier time of it than will single women. Similarly, rich singles will sail more smoothly through singlehood than will poor singles. Second, everyone else carries favor to the degree that they honor soulmate values. Did you ever have a serious partner? If so, then you are better than all of those people who never had one. (So, divorced and widowed singles are better than people who have always been single). Is your soulmate no longer with you through no fault of your own? If so, then you get some credit, too. (So, widows are in some ways better than divorced people.) If you don't have a serious partner, are you at least trying to find one? That's good, too. When I say that some singles are better than others, I mean better in the public eye. Better mythologically. The lives of the "better" singles seem to make more sense and seem worthy of greater respect than the lives of the "lesser" singles. With regard to how different kinds of singles are actually doing, though — now that's a whole different story.

[End of Excerpt]

4. What Do You Think?

What other meanings of "single" do you know of? What are your thoughts on whether "single" is the right word to use? Let's discuss these matters in the Comments section.

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Note: In my last post, when I asked for your personal stories of standing up to singlism, I should have included another example: Have you ever objected to the "boxes" people want to put you in? When some form in a doctor's office or some item on a social networking site asks about your marital or relationship status, is there an option that works for you? Have you ever challenged the assumption that this information is relevant? That counts as standing up to singlism.

Reference

[Qualitative Research Methods](#)

[Advancing Health Education With Telemedicine \(Advances in Medical Education, Research, and Ethics\)](#)