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The Critical and Narrative Orientation of Singlism in Psychological Research

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Abstract

Singlism refers to stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination against individuals who are single. In contemporary societies, relationship norms often privilege couplehood, shaping how single individuals are perceived, treated, and evaluated in social, occupational, healthcare, and institutional contexts. This combined narrative and critical review synthesizes recent evidence (2020–2025) to understand the psychological and socio-cultural mechanisms that produce singlism, the outcomes for single individuals, and methodological trends in current research. Studies indicate that negative attitudes toward singlehood are driven by internalized allonormativity, relationship pedestal beliefs, and cultural couple normativity. Findings further show heterogeneity among singles' wellbeing outcomes, with factors such as friendship satisfaction, self-esteem, social pressure to partner, and personal romantic goals playing a decisive role. However, the literature is limited by cross-sectional designs, culturally narrow samples, heavy reliance on self-report measures, and underrepresentation of diverse gender identities and longitudinal trajectories. Practical and policy recommendations are proposed to reduce singlism, promote inclusive psychological practice, and encourage stronger research designs.

Keywords: *singlism, singlehood, discrimination, couple normativity, allonormativity, wellbeing*

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1. Introduction

Romantic relationships are frequently treated as a central marker of adulthood, stability, and fulfillment. This expectation creates a socially sanctioned framework where marriage or committed partnership is often presented as the preferred life route. Within this context, single individuals may experience singlism, which can manifest as stereotyping (e.g., lonely, immature), discrimination (e.g., social exclusion), or institutional barriers (e.g., services designed for couples).

Despite rising numbers of unmarried adults globally, singlehood continues to be perceived through a deficit lens. Psychology increasingly recognizes the consequences of these norms, not only for singles' wellbeing but also for society's broader definitions of happiness, success, and personal worth.

This review integrates recent studies to critically examine:

1. How singlism is conceptualized and measured,
2. The psychological processes underlying singlism, and
3. Outcomes of discrimination and stigma for singles.

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2. Scope and Review Method

The review follows a narrative synthesis approach while incorporating critical evaluation of methodological strengths and weaknesses across studies.

The included studies span:

- Cross-sectional surveys,
- Mixed-method designs,
- Vignette-based experimental approaches,
- Secondary data and multilevel cultural analysis,
- Longitudinal qualitative interviews.

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3. Narrative Synthesis of Key Themes

3.1 Social Stereotyping of Singles and Relationship Ideology

Evidence suggests that people strongly associate relationship status with life outcomes. Komlenac et al. (2025) showed that individuals judged life satisfaction largely based on whether a person is single, reflecting committed-relationship ideology and internalized relationship norms. Such judgments reveal that cultural narratives continue to treat singlehood as inherently negative rather than as a neutral social status.

Beauparlant and Machia (2024) demonstrated that stereotypes toward singles vary depending on perceived "reasons" for singlehood. Singles are not simply stigmatized as a homogeneous group; the stigma changes depending on whether observers attribute singlehood to personal choice, circumstances, or inability to attract partners.

3.2 Discrimination and Gendered Dimensions of Singlism

Singlism does not affect all individuals equally. Dupuis and Girme (2024) highlighted gendered stereotypes such as "Cat Ladies" or "Mama's Boys," indicating that the cultural scripts attached to single men and women differ significantly Notably, while personal discrimination levels may not differ strongly, perceptions of group-level discrimination do, especially among single women.

From a structural perspective, Carr et al. (2024) focused on economic consequences of lifelong singlehood, showing that lifelong single men had lower household income and higher poverty risk compared to other marital categories. This indicates singlism is not merely psychological and it produces real-world disadvantages.

3.3 Psychological Wellbeing: Heterogeneity Among Singles

A crucial advancement in recent singlism research is the clear finding that single individuals are not uniformly unhappy. Walsh et al. (2024) and Walsh et al. (2022) strongly emphasized heterogeneity in happiness among singles. Wellbeing differences were mainly explained by:

- Friendship satisfaction,
- Family satisfaction,
- Self-esteem,
- Personality traits (extraversion and neuroticism).

Horton et al. (2025) further added that wellbeing among singles depends on alignment between romantic goals and perceived pressure to partner, rather than on singlehood itself. This distinction is essential: it shifts the focus from "singlehood as a problem" to social pressure as a stressor.

3.4 Sexual Satisfaction and the Singlehood Narrative

Fischer (2023) examined the stereotype that singles are sexually dissatisfied. Findings showed partnered adults reported higher sexual satisfaction overall, yet satisfaction with relationship status was as important as sexual behavior. This challenges simplistic and stigmatizing assumptions and suggests that psychological acceptance and social validation may influence sexual wellbeing.

3.5 Cultural and Intersectional Contexts

Kowal and Adamczyk (2025) provided a cross-national multilevel analysis showing that singlehood rates vary with demographic factors (age, education, income, employment) and cultural context (e.g., individualism and collectivism). . Importantly, demographic effects differed across cultures, indicating that singlism is partly a product of societal structure.

Kolehmainen et al. (2023) enriched this discussion through intersectional qualitative findings, showing that singlehood can also represent "open time" as a space for creativity, self-actualization, and alternative futures, especially for LGBTIQA+ participants. This is critical because it reframes singlehood as potentially empowering rather than deficient.

3.6 Singlism Beyond Relationships: Applied Context (Tourism/Services)

Llano (2020) explored singlism in the travel industry, finding that perceived singlism reduced service satisfaction and loyalty, but high service quality could mitigate the effect. This expands the field by showing that singlism operates in consumer environments too.

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4. Critical Review of the Literature

4.1 Strengths of Current Research

Recent studies demonstrate clear progress through:

- Use of latent profile analysis (Walsh et al., 2022; Walsh et al., 2024) to capture diversity among singles.
- Use of mixed methods (Dupuis & Girme, 2024) adding depth to stereotypes beyond numerical findings.
- Cross-national dataset work (Kowal & Adamczyk, 2025) enabling cultural-level interpretations.

4.2 Key Limitations and Gaps

Although the research base is growing, major limitations persist:

1. **Overreliance on cross-sectional designs**

   Most studies cannot establish cause-and-effect relationships between singlism and wellbeing.
2. **Limited cultural representativeness**

   Many studies are conducted in Western contexts (North America, U.S., German-speaking regions), limiting global applicability.
3. **Sampling limitations**

   Several studies used undergraduate convenience samples, reducing external validity.
4. **Narrow gender categories**

   Most research includes only cisgender men and women, omitting transgender and non-binary experiences.
5. **Measurement concerns**

   Some studies used limited measures (e.g., single-item sexual satisfaction) which weakens interpretation.
6. **Neglect of structural/institutional singlism**

   Psychological stigma is widely studied, but institutional policies (benefits, healthcare, housing) remain under-examined.

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5. Implications

5.1 Theoretical Implications

- Singlehood must be treated as a legitimate life status rather than an incomplete stage.
- Models of wellbeing should include friendship and community belonging on par with romantic relationships.
- Singlism should be conceptualized as both interpersonal prejudice and structural inequality.

5.2 Social and Policy Implications

- Social narratives privileging couplehood reinforce stigma and social pressure.
- Workplace, healthcare, housing, and service systems may unintentionally marginalize singles.
- Economic disadvantages for lifelong singles suggest a need for more inclusive financial and retirement policy design.

5.3 Clinical and Educational Implications

- Clinicians must avoid "partnering bias" (assuming relationship formation is the solution).
- Counseling goals should focus on meaning, wellbeing, and autonomy—not necessarily couple formation.
- Educational curricula should challenge relationship pedestal beliefs early.

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6. Recommendations

6.1 Recommendations for Future Research

1. Conduct longitudinal studies to test causal pathways between singlism and wellbeing.
2. Expand inclusion of non-binary, transgender, and queer populations.
3. Use multi-cultural samples, especially from Asian, African, and Middle Eastern contexts.
4. Employ multi-method measurement (behavioral indicators, diary studies, implicit measures).
5. Study institutional singlism in workplaces, healthcare systems, and public policies.

6.2 Recommendations for Practice (Clinical/Counseling)

1. Avoid assuming singlehood reflects pathology or deficit.
2. Assess social pressure to partner as a psychological stressor.
3. Build interventions that strengthen:
    - friendship quality,
    - community belonging,
    - self-esteem and identity validation,
    - autonomy and acceptance of life choices.

6.3 Recommendations for Social Institutions and Policy

1. Promote inclusive policies that do not privilege couples in:
   - taxation,
   - housing,
   - insurance benefits,
   - workplace leave and allowances.
2. Ensure services and marketing avoid stigmatizing singles (e.g., travel and hospitality).
3. Promote social campaigns challenging stereotypes of single individuals.

7. Conclusion

This review demonstrates that singlism is a meaningful psychological and social phenomenon influenced by deeply embedded relationship ideologies and cultural norms. Across studies, singles are subject to stereotyping and discrimination, yet wellbeing outcomes are diverse and strongly shaped by social relationships, self-esteem, and perceived pressure to partner. The literature shows progress but remains methodologically limited by cross-sectional designs, narrow sampling, and cultural constraints. Future research should adopt inclusive and longitudinal approaches to develop robust theory and interventions. Most importantly, psychological practice and society must reframe singlehood as a valid life path rather than a deficiency.

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