Empowering, Pragmatic, or Disappointing: Appraisals of Singlehood During Emerging and Established Adulthood

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Abstract

Although singlehood is common during emerging and established adulthood, it is often positioned as less desirable than being partnered. Using data from 168 single emerging (18-29 years-old) and established (30-35 years-old) adults from the United States, we explored how they appraised being single (i.e., viewing singlehood as empowering, allowing for personal goals, and/or being disappointing) and explored how demographic, romantic, and well-being indicators were associated with singlehood appraisals. Emerging and established adults did not differ in how they appraised singlehood. Overall, 42.9% felt it was true/very true that being single was empowering, 75.0% felt it was true/very true that being single facilitated personal goals and interests, and 37.5% felt it was true/very true that were disappointed to be single. Flourishing, intentional singlehood, length of singlehood, relationship interest, education, employment, and race/ethnicity were associated with singlehood appraisals.

Keywords

singlehood, emerging adulthood, established adulthood, romantic development

Emerging adulthood provides a moratorium from the responsibilities of adulthood, allowing for identity exploration, investing time and resources into completing an advanced education, starting a career, and exploring romantic options (Arnett, 2015). The proposal of established adulthood as a distinct developmental period following emerging adulthood (see Mehta et al., 2020) has prompted a need for explorations of the transition between emerging and established adulthood in terms of life events, obligations, and perceptions of one's own development. Mehta et al. suggested that the beginning of established adulthood (around age 30) is marked by completing education and establishing a career and, potentially, a family. Beyond those major life events, however, little research or theorizing has addressed how emerging and established adults may feel differently about their lives and the accomplishment of (or lack of accomplishment) salient developmental tasks. In this brief report we explored being single through a developmental lens by comparing emerging and early established adults' experiences of singlehood. Specifically, we examined how emerging and established adults felt about being single and explored if those appraisals were associated with other features of their lives (e.g., education and employment, flourishing, and romantic interest and experience).

Singlehood is often positioned as less desirable than being romantically involved (DePaulo, 2014), and research on perceptions of being single have emphasized its negative attributes (Sharp & Ganong, 2011; Spielmann et al., 2016). Because many emerging and established adults view romantic relationships as desirable and important aspects of their lives (Watkins & Beckmeyer, 2020), some individuals may indeed be disappointed to be single. Yet, some emerging and established adults choose to be and are satisfied being single (Adamczyk, 2017; Lehrmann et al., 2015). Thus, emerging and established adults will likely recognize both positive and negative aspects of being single.

The potential benefits of singlehood can be understood from a developmental task perspective. Within developmental task theory, romantic involvement is one of several developmental domains (e.g., education, employment, and healthy lifestyles) from which salient tasks emerge during emerging and established adulthood (Schulenberg et al., 2004). Being

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single may be beneficial for emerging and established adults, by allowing them to focus on tasks outside of the romantic domain that they may view as important prerequisites for romantic commitments (Kefalas et al., 2011). For example, being single can provide autonomy, flexibility, and control over one's life at a time when transitions across multiple developmental domains is common (Tan et al., 2021). Thus, single emerging and established adults may have greater mobility for education and occupational opportunities than their partnered peers (Jamison & Beckmeyer, 2021). Singlehood may also facilitate changing or developing lifestyles, values, or identities as emerging and established adults can focus on themselves without having to take a partner into account. (Jamison & Sanner, 2021). The transition to established adulthood can involve individuals experiencing simultaneous high demands in employment, caregiving, and family responsibilities, leading to a "career-care crunch" (Mehta et al., 2020, pp. 436). Single established adults, especially if they are child free, may experience a less intense crunch or no crunch at all. Thus, singlehood can convey benefits to emerging and established adults as they navigate salient developmental tasks in the areas of relationships, education, work, and identity.

Although singlehood may convey benefits to both emerging and established adults, it remains unclear whether they view singlehood differently. For example, romantic instability and self-focus are normative during emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2015), which may make singlehood more appealing during this part of the life course. Conversely, established adults are expected to have accomplished many of the developmental markers of adulthood (e.g., completed education, established a career, settled into a community) so they may face pressure to develop a committed romantic relationship (Moore & Radtke, 2015) and more keenly feel the absence of a partnership (Sharp & Ganong, 2011), leading to less positive appraisals of being single.

Perceptions of being single are likely associated with other aspects of emerging and established adults' lives (e.g., educational attainment, employment status, romantic experiences, and sense of flourishing). When emerging and established adults have achieved the pre-requisite goals for starting a family (e.g., education and career attainment), they may perceive fewer benefits and greater disappointment with being single. However, if emerging and established adults are still pursuing an education or career stability, they may recognize that being single provides space to pursue those aspects of their development, leading to more positive appraisals of being single. Romantic relationship interest may also shape how emerging and established adults appraise singlehood. Specifically, we anticipated that when relationship interest is high and being single is seen as an unintentional choice, appraisals of singlehood will be less positive. This may be because singletons who do want a partner, perceive a shrinking pool of potential partners, and fear they are going to miss out on finding someone compatible (Boyd et al., 2020;

Sharp & Ganong, 2011). Finally, emerging and established adults who perceive they are flourishing (i.e., optimism, purpose, and sense of accomplishment in one's life; Diener et al., 2010) may feel more positive about being single because they are achieving a satisfying life without a romantic partner.

Present Study

In the present study we explored how emerging and early established adults felt about being single by having them appraise their singlehood in terms of empowerment, providing opportunities for personal goals, and/or disappointment. Allowing for both positive and negative appraisals was important because prior singlehood research has primarily focused the negative aspects of being single (Sharp & Ganong, 2011). We compared emerging and established adults' appraisals of being single and assessed the association between singlehood appraisals and educational attainment, employment status, relationship interest and experience, and flourishing.

Method

Study data were from the Relationship Histories Project (RHP), a cross-sectional survey of 18–35 year-olds' current and past romantic experiences. Participants were recruited via Qualtrics Panel Services based on three criteria: ages 18–35 years, currently living in the United States, and being able to read and write English. Those interested in the study read a description of the RHP and those who decided to participate provided informed consent and completed an online survey. Data were collected in December 2019. The RHP sample included 540 participants. For the present study, we limited the sample to single participants based the question: "Do you consider yourself to be romantically involved with someone right now, even if it is casual?" Those who answered "no" were considered single ($n = 188$). We further restricted the sample to those with complete data on the variables used in this study. The final sample included 168 single emerging and established (see Table 1 for demographics).

Measures

Appraisals of singlehood. Three items assessed appraisals of being single (see Table 2). Each item was rated using a 4-point scale (1 = not at all true to 4 = very true).

Intentional singlehood. Single participants rated (1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree) the statement: "Being single is an intentional choice."

Romantic relationship interest. We asked single participants: "You indicated that you are not currently in a romantic relationship. Do you want to be in a romantic relationship?" There were four responses: (1) No, and I don't want to, (2) I am not sure if I want to, (3) I would like to be in a relationship but it is not that important to me, and (4) Yes, I would really like to be in a relationship right now.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics.

	Full Sample (N = 168)	Emerging Adults (n = 123)	Established Adults (n = 45)
	M (SD) or n (%)	M (SD) or n (%)	M (SD) or n (%)
Age	25.24 (5.39)	22.57 (3.44)	32.53 (1.77)
Race ethnicity			
Black non-Hispanic	31 (18.5%)	26 (21.1%)	5 (11.1%)
Hispanic	19 (11.3%)	16 (13.0%)	3 (6.7%)
Another race/ethnicity	25 (14.9%)	16 (13.0%)	9 (20.0%)
White non-Hispanic	93 (55.4%)	65 (52.8%)	28 (62.2%)
Gender			
Female	69 (41.1%)	53 (43.1%)	16 (35.6%)
Male	96 (57.1%)	67 (54.5%)	29 (64.4%)
Transgender, gender non-binary, another gender	3 (1.8%)	3 (2.4%)	0 (0.0%)
Sexual identity			
Heterosexual	136 (81.0%)	98 (79.7%)	38 (84.4%)
Gay, lesbian, bisexual, another sexual identity	32 (19.0%)	25 (20.3%)	7 (15.6%)
Educational attainment			
Some college or less	88 (52.4%)	65 (52.8%)	23 (51.1%)
Current 4-year college student	20 (11.9%)	20 (16.3%)	0 (0.0%)
4-year degree or more	60 (35.7%)	38 (30.9%)	22 (48.9%)
Employment			
Employed full time	70 (41.7%)	42 (34.1%)	28 (62.2%)
Employed part-time	42 (25.0%)	37 (30.1%)	5 (11.1%)
Not employed	56 (33.3%)	44 (35.8%)	12 (26.7%)
Is a parent	15 (8.9%)	7 (5.7%)	8 (17.8%)
Length of time single			
Never been in a relationship	55 (32.7%)	46 (37.4%)	9 (20.0%)
6-months or less	30 (17.9%)	23 (18.7%)	7 (15.6%)
7-months to 1-year	15 (8.9%)	13 (10.6%)	2 (4.4%)
More than 1-year	68 (40.5%)	41 (33.3%)	27 (60.0%)
Being single is an intentional choice	4.09 (1.55)	4.11 (1.51)	4.04 (1.68)
Romantic relationship interest			
No, I don't want to be in a romantic relationship	34 (20.2%)	21 (17.1%)	13 (28.9%)
I am not sure if I want to be in a romantic relationship	18 (10.7%)	14 (11.4%)	4 (8.9%)
I would like to be in a romantic relationship, but it is not that important to me right now	70 (41.7%)	55 (44.7%)	15 (33.3%)
Yes, I would really want to be in a relationship right now	46 (27.4%)	33 (26.8%)	13 (28.9%)
Flourishing	5.16 (1.25)	5.14 (1.24)	5.22 (1.30)

Educational attainment. Participants reported the highest level of education they had completed and if they were currently enrolled in an education program. Using participants responses, we placed participants into one of three categories: (1) some college or less, (2) currently enrolled in a 4-year college program, or (3) a 4-year college degree or more.

Employment. Current employment status was coded into three categories: (1) unemployed, (2) employed part-time, or (3) employed fulltime.

Flourishing. Flourishing was assessed using the Flourishing Scale (Diener, et al., 2010; 8-items; α = .91). Items were rated using a 7-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree). Scores were computed by averaging across the items. Higher scores reflect greater feelings of optimism, purpose, and perception of success in important life domains.

Control variables. We controlled for participants' age, gender (female; male; or transgender, gender non-binary, or another gender), race/ethnicity (White non-Hispanic; other race/ethnicities), sexual identity (heterosexual; lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, or pansexual), and how long they had been single (never had a romantic relationship, 6-months or less, 7-months to 1-year, or more than 1 year).

Results

Based on chi-square tests, emerging and established adults did not differ in their appraisals of being single (see Table 2).

Table 2. Appraisals of Being Single.

	Full Sample (N = 168)	Emerging Adults (n = 123)	Established Adults (n = 45)	
	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	χ^2 (3)
I Feel empowered by being single				3.42, p = .332
Not at all true	41 (24.4%)	29 (23.6%)	12 (26.7%)	
A little true	55 (32.7%)	45 (36.6%)	10 (22.2%)	
True	41 (24.4%)	27 (21.9%)	14 (31.1%0	
Very true	31 (18.5%)	22 (17.9%)	9 (20.0%)	
Being single allows me the time and space to pursue my own goals and interests				3.87, p = .276
Not at all true	12 (7.1%)	7 (5.7%)	5 (11.1%)	
A little true	30 (17.9%)	25 (20.3%)	5 (11.1%)	
True	66 (39.3%)	50 (40.7%)	16 (35.6%)	
Very true	60 (35.7%)	41 (33.3%)	19 (42.2%)	
I Am disappointed to be single at this point in my life				3.44, p = .329
Not at all true	62 (36.9%)	43 (34.9%)	19 (42.2%)	
A little true	43 (25.6%)	36 (29.3%)	7 (15.6%)	
True	34 (20.2%)	23 (18.7%)	11 (24.4%)	
Very true	29 (17.3%)	21 (17.1%)	8 (17.8%)	

Table 3. *Odds Ratios and Confidence Intervals from Ordinal Regression Models for Singlehood Appraisals (N = 168).*

	Singlehood is Empowering			Singlehood Allows for Goals and Interests			Singlehood is Disappointing		
	OR	95% CI	p	OR	95% CI	p	OR	95% CI	p
Age	1.02	[0.96, 1.09]	.489	1.01	[0.94, 1.08]	.763	1.07	[1.00, 1.14]	.050
Gender (female is referent)									
Male	0.62	[0.32, 1.20]	.158	0.94	[0.47, 1.86]	.852	0.90	[0.46, 1.81]	.759
Transgender, gender non- binary, another gender	0.77	[0.06, 9.27]	.839	0.40	[0.04, 4.49]	.456	3.82	[0.35, 41.85]	.272
White non-Hispanic	0.44	[0.24, 0.82]	.010	0.79	[0.42, 1.50]	.476	1.32	[0.70, 2.48]	.395
Sexual minority	1.10	[0.48, 2.54]	.817	2.18	[0.88, 5.39]	.091	0.44	[0.18, 1.08]	.073
Education (some college or less is referent)									
4-year degree or more	1.19	[0.58, 2.44]	.629	1.68	[0.79, 3.56]	.176	0.31	[0.15, 0.67]	.003
Current 4-year student	2.80	[0.41, 3.02]	.840	2.44	[0.82, 7.24]	.109	1.15	[0.41, 3.26]	.792
Employment (employed full time is referent)									
Unemployed	0.75	[0.35, 1.59]	.447	3.87	[1.70, 8.80]	.001	0.39	[0.17, 0.86]	.019
Part-time employment	1.44	[0.64, 3.27]	.381	2.97	[1.23, 7.18]	.016	1.10	[0.47, 2.55]	.827
Being single is intentional	1.56	[1.25, 1.94]	<.001	1.44	[1.15, 1.80]	.001	0.86	[0.69, 1.06]	.161
Relationship interest (not interested is referent)									
Not sure if want relationship	0.70	[0.22, 2.20]	.542	0.55	[0.16, 1.92]	.347	2.97	[0.83, 10.58]	.093
Want relationship, but not important	0.39	[0.16, 0.94]	.036	0.42	[0.16, 1.10]	.078	8.20	[2.93, 22.97]	<.001
Really want relationship	0.27	[0.10, 0.71]	.008	0.20	[0.07, 0.58]	.003	19.67	[6.53, 59.15]	<.001
Time single (never had a relationship is referent)									
6-months or less	1.47	[0.61, 3.54]	.396	1.24	[0.50, 3.07]	.647	0.50	[0.20, 1.24]	.137
7-months to 1-year	2.83	[1.09, 7.36]	.033	3.69	[1.34, 10.18]	.012	0.31	[0.11, 0.84]	.021
More than 1-year	1.78	[0.80, 3.96]	.159	3.77	[1.58, 8.99]	.003	0.17	[0.17, 0.89]	.025
Flourishing	1.42	[1.10, 1.85]	.008	1.64	[1.25, 2.15]	<.001	0.78	[0.60, 1.01]	.063
−2 Log likelihood χ^2 (17)	66.02		<.001	67.58		<.001	64.63		<.001

Approximately, 43% of the participants felt it was true or very true that being single was empowering, 75% felt it was true or very true that being single allowed space for goals and interest, and 37.5% felt it was true or very true that they were disappointed to be single at this point in their lives.

Ordinal regression models were used to test if the singlehood appraisals were associated with education, employment, relationship interest, and flourishing. Because emerging and established adults' singlehood appraisals were not significantly different, we did not compute separate ordinal regression models for each group. Each ordinal regression model was significant, and odds ratios and confidence intervals are provided in Table 3. Complete model information is provided in the online supplemental materials. Flourishing was associated with a greater likely of singlehood being viewed as empowering ($OR = 1.42$, $p = .008$) and providing opportunities for pursuing other goals and interests ($OR = 1.64$, $p < .001$). Compared to not wanting to be in romantic relationship, wanting a relationship – but it not being important right now was associated with a lower likelihood of perceiving being single as empowering ($OR = 0.39$, $p = .036$), but a higher likelihood of viewing singlehood as disappointing ($OR = 8.20$, $p < .001$). Further, really wanting a romantic relationship was associated with lower likelihood that singlehood was viewed as empowering ($OR = 0.27$, $p = .008$) and that being single provides opportunities for pursuing goals and interests ($OR = 0.20$, $p = .003$), but a greater likelihood that singlehood was viewed as disappointing ($OR = 19.67$, $p < .001$). Believing being single was an intentional choice was associated with a greater likelihood of singlehood being viewed as empowering ($OR = 1.56$, $p < .001$) and providing opportunities for pursuing other goals and interests ($OR = 1.44$, $p = .001$). Compared to those employed fulltime, unemployed ($OR = 3.87$, $p = .001$) or part-time employed ($OR = 2.97$, $p = .016$) participants were more likely to report that being single allowed them to pursue other goals and interests. Unemployed participants were also less likely to be disappointed to be single ($OR = 0.39$, $p = .019$). Compared to those with some college or less education, participants with a 4-year college degree or more ($OR = 0.31$, $p = .003$) were less likely to be disappointed to be single.

Discussion

Our results contribute to the broader literature on singlehood by using a developmental approach to exploring the experiences of individuals who are unpartnered. Previous research has focused on whether singlehood is voluntary or involuntary (Adamczyk, 2017) or whether it is a short-term or long-term state (Pepping & MacDonald, 2019). Our results provide insights into how an individuals stage of development shapes the experiences of singlehood and the potential developmental benefits of being single. Although most emerging and established adults in our sample perceived that being single provides opportunities to pursue individual goals and interests, most do not find singlehood empowering and a sizable minority (38.8%) are disappointment to be single. These appraisals support a multifaceted view of singlehood. Being disappointed in being single does not preclude one from recognizing that it allows time for personal goals and interests. Such dialectical thinking may help emerging and established adults cope when they are single but desire romantic partnership. Emerging and established adults did not differ in how they appraised being single. This similarity may reflect that as the path to family formation lengthens, being single is becoming a similar experience for emerging adulthood and the first few years of established adulthood.

Greater flourishing and stronger agreement that being single was intentional may support more positive appraisals of singlehood (i.e., viewing singlehood as empowering and providing opportunities for goals and interests). Perhaps, when individuals are meeting the demands of emerging or established adulthood and have a sense of optimism and purpose (i.e., they are flourishing), they frame singlehood as something that has helped them achieve their current life success. Similarly, viewing singlehood as an intentional choice may prime emerging and established adults to attend to the positive aspects of being single. Thus, being able to frame singlehood as a product of personal choice while also believing one is flourishing may create a more positive experience of singlehood. Conversely, relationship interest may contribute to more negative appraisals of singlehood. Specifically, participants who indicated that they wanted to be in a relationship, but it was not that important or that they really wanted to be in a relationship viewed being single as less empowering and more disappointing. When single emerging and established adults desire romantic partners, singlehood is likely a barrier to an important life goal. Thus, when asked to reflect on their experience of being single, they may be more attentive to the negative aspects of singlehood rather than the benefits.

Education and employment were each associated with one singlehood appraisal. Participants with a 4-year degree or more, compared to those with some college or less, were less disappointed about being single. For these emerging and established adults, a college degree, may be perceived as a worthwhile trade-off to currently being single. Full-time employment, compared to being unemployed, was linked to a lower likelihood of perceiving singlehood as allowing someone to pursue their other goals or interests. It may be that employment leaves less time for outside interests, so overall these individuals did not perceive singlehood to enhance their access to leisure experiences (Hartman & Bonica, 2019).

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, our data only provide insights about one point in participants' romantic lives. Appraisals of singlehood may shift over time and in response to changes in other developmental domains. Longitudinal data is needed to draw conclusions about how singlehood meaning-making changes as individuals get older and have additional romantic experiences or continue to remain single. Our single-hood appraisals are single items and do not capture all the ways emerging and established adults may feel about being single. Qualitative studies may be especially beneficial for capturing

feelings about and reasons for being single. Our sample also included more emerging adults than established adults and the established adults only represent the early part of this developmental stage. A larger proportion of established adults would allow for additional comparisons to distinguish between the beliefs and experiences of emerging and established adults.

Conclusions

Our results illustrate that emerging and established adults recognize both positive and negative aspects to being single. The lack of distinction in our findings between emerging and established adults suggests that feelings about being single may be more individual than developmental. This is an especially important contribution of this study as it suggests that rising expectations for family formation with age do not necessarily shift individuals' appraisals of their singlehood. This is consistent with contemporary research showing that individuals desire diverse pathways for their lives, some involving romantic partnership and others not (Kefalas et al., 2011; Jamison & Sanner, 2021). By taking an individual approach, this study also helps to breakdown assumptions that singles are a homogenous group. Individuals who want to be in a relationship will likely feel less positively about singlehood than those who lack a desire for romantic partnership. Regardless of individual differences, helping emerging and established adults frame singlehood as within their control may facilitate recognizing the benefits that can come from being unpartnered, such as pursuing their own goals. These positive perceptions of singlehood in turn may lead to positive outcomes, such as flourishing.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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Transparency and Openness Statement

The raw data, analysis code, and materials used in this study are not openly available. For inquiries about the data analysis and results please contact the first author. For inquiries about the raw data please contact the second author.

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