

Social and Emotional Well-Being of Single Women in Contemporary America

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The harmful consequences of singlehood for contemporary American women's physical, emotional, social, and economic well-being have been widely documented and debated.¹ The observation that being single is a less desirable status than being married has been trumpeted in recent popular books, including Linda J. Waite and Maggie Gallagher's *The Case for Marriage*, Sylvia Ann Hewlett's *Creating a Life*, and Danielle Crittenden's *What Our Mothers Didn't Tell Us*, and has guided the implementation of pro-marriage social policies, including "covenant marriage," and economic and tax policies that favor married couples.²

Despite pervasive beliefs that marriage enhances the quality of American women's lives, past empirical research on the protective effects of marriage has several limitations that may undermine its persuasiveness. First, "marriage" is narrowly conceptualized and refers to one's legal status only. The nature and quality of one's marriage are seldom considered: the assumption is that all marriages are "good" marriages. Similarly, "single" women often are treated as a monolithic and homogeneous group, yet this large and heterogeneous group actually includes formerly married women (i.e., divorced, separated, or widowed), never-married heterosexual women residing with a romantic partner, lesbians, and women with no romantic partner. Second, the purported benefits of marriage (relative to singlehood) are conceptualized in fairly narrow terms and reflect traditional notions of marriage in which husbands perform "instrumental" roles and women specialize in "expressive" tasks.³ Women are presumed to benefit financially from their husbands' paid employment, while men receive emotional and physical health benefits from their nurturing wives. Other aspects of marriage and social life, such as sexual intimacy, or the extent to which spouses receive emotional support from others, often are ignored.

Third, most research presumes that the meaning, desirability, and necessity of marriage are stable over both historical and personal time. However, as the advantages traditionally associated with marriage have eroded over the past half century, the disadvantages typically associated with singlehood have eroded in tandem. For

example, women's educational and occupational opportunities have expanded dramatically over the past four decades; thus women's economic need for marriage has declined considerably, and women's ability to support themselves without a spouse has increased.⁴ At the same time, advancements in reproductive technologies—such as *in vitro* fertilization—enable unpartnered women (and lesbian couples) to have a biological child outside of the traditional heterosexual marital relationship.⁵

Cultural and normative shifts in the value of marriage *vis-à-vis* other forms of social relationships, such as cohabitation, friendships, and gay relationships, also have occurred in the last four decades. The proportion of Americans who cohabit before (or in place of) marriage has increased steadily over the past three decades, and the majority of newlyweds today lived with their spouse before marriage.⁶ Nearly universal acceptance of premarital sexual relations today means that marriage is no longer a prerequisite for establishing and maintaining an intimate romantic partnership.⁷ The importance and beneficial effects of marriage also may shift over the personal life course; single women's adaptations are neglected in extant studies of marriage and well-being. Few studies of the benefits of marriage (and the stressors of singlehood) acknowledge that adults adjust to the opportunities and constraints facing them; unmarried women may make choices and carve out lives for themselves that mesh with and enhance their role as a single woman.

In this chapter, I question the pervasive assumption that marriage enhances women's well-being and examine whether currently married, cohabiting, never-married, and formerly married women differ significantly in their psychological health. I also evaluate four possible explanations for the observed linkage between marital status and psychological well-being: (1) availability of social and emotional support from friends; (2) satisfaction with one's sexual life; (3) one's particular sexual orientation; and (4) personal beliefs about the desirability and necessity of marriage. Finally, I examine the extent to which the psychological consequences of marital status vary over the life course and across birth cohorts. I use data from the Midlife Development in the United States (MIDUS) study, a sample survey of more than three thousand Americans ages twenty-five to seventy-four in 1995, to address these aims.

Single Women in America: Who Are They?

The United States is unquestionably a pro-marriage society. Cultural images, public policies, and personal attitudes elevate the status and value of heterosexual marriage relative to single life in the United States today.⁸ Even popular "reality" television shows, situation comedies, and films owe a posthumous screenwriter's credit to Jane Austen, as their final scenes often fade to a dreamily enamored heterosexual couple at (or on their way to) the altar.⁹ Although marriage persists as a cultural ideal, single adults—and particularly single women—comprise a sizable, heterogeneous, and rapidly growing sector of the United States population. In 2000, roughly one-half of the fourteen million adult women in the United States were married, and an equal proportion were unmarried. According to official U.S. Census statistics, the terms "single" and "unmarried" women may include

never-married women who live alone, never-married women who cohabit with a romantic partner, and divorced, separated, or widowed persons who formerly were married. Moreover, the “never-married” subgroup is highly diverse: some are unmarried by choice; others view themselves as “temporarily” single and are waiting to find a spouse; others, still, are legally prohibited from marrying because they and their partner are of the same sex.¹⁰

The proportion of women in the United States who are currently single has increased steadily over the past five decades for several reasons. First, women are delaying marriage, remaining single well into their thirties and even forties. In the 1950s and early 1960s, American women married at age twenty-one on average. Today, the average woman marries at age twenty-five, and this age creeps up steadily as a woman’s educational attainment increases.¹¹ This delay in marriage is due in part to young women’s desire to complete their education before marrying. Yet delayed marriage also is due to an increased acceptance of premarital sexual relations and a concomitant rise in cohabitation rates; more than 60 percent of recent newlyweds lived with their partner before marrying.¹² As a result of these patterns, a statistical snapshot of the United States reveals a higher proportion of “never-married” women than ever before.

Second, divorce rates increased steadily and then plateaued during the last four decades of the twentieth century, reflecting a greater acceptance of divorce, a rise in the ideology of individualism, and increases in women’s economic independence.¹³ In 2000, roughly 20 percent of women ages thirty-five to fifty-nine were divorced or separated, whereas in 1950 just 5 percent of same-age women were divorced or separated. Third, the gender gap in mortality has increased steadily throughout the twentieth century, whereby men now die seven years younger than women. The gender gap in mortality reflects historical shifts in the causes of death; leading causes of death today—particularly cancer and heart disease—disproportionately strike men.¹⁴ As a result, many more women than men are widowed. Among men and women ages sixty and older in 2000, just 11 percent of men yet 40 percent of women were widowed.¹⁵ Widowed and divorced women are far less likely than their male peers to remarry, reflecting a gender imbalance in the older population, coupled with men’s tendency to marry women two to three years younger than themselves. Interestingly, just 46 percent of women but 75 percent of men ages sixty and older were married in 2000.¹⁶ Although singlehood today is relatively common, and even normative for some age strata, both social scientists and casual observers characterize single women as less happy, well-adjusted, and fulfilled than their married peers.¹⁷ The overarching aim of this chapter is to interrogate the assumption that married women are better off and to uncover the reasons behind this pervasive and widely accepted belief.

The Psychological Well-Being of Married and Unmarried Women

Married women in the United States today typically experience better psychological and physical health, sexual satisfaction, and economic stability than

their unmarried peers do.¹⁸ However, explanations for why and how marriage enhances (and singlehood undermines) well-being are incomplete. Most studies of marriage and well-being follow one of two tracks: identifying the distinctive aspects of marriage that benefit women and men, and examining whether marriage affects psychological well-being, or vice versa.

Gender differences in the benefits (and strains) of marriage have been explored extensively. Feminist writings, exemplified in Jessie Bernard's (1972) *Future of Marriage*, have argued that traditional marriages—in which men specialize in performing the “breadwinner” role and women are responsible for childbearing and childrearing—benefit men more than women. Although “his” marriage brings a man health, power, and life satisfaction, “her” marriage subjects a woman to stress, dissatisfaction, and loss of self.¹⁹ Men are purported to suffer more than women when single or upon the loss of a spouse because they have more to lose. Recent empirical studies counter, however, that marriage benefits *both* women and men, yet in different ways.²⁰

Women typically benefit economically from marriage and remarriage, whereas men receive rich social and emotional rewards. Women are more likely than men to experience economic hardship (and consequently, psychological distress) upon either divorce or widowhood.²¹ Because women typically shoulder the responsibility for childrearing in traditional marriages, they exit the labor force (or reduce their work hours) when children are young, and so they experience both the absolute loss of personal earnings and the loss of skills that enable their smooth reentry into the work force.²² Forsaking one's career to care for one's family also takes a direct toll on a woman's self-acceptance and optimism about her future career prospects.²³

For men, in contrast, marriage provides social, emotional, and health-enhancing support. For instance, men are more likely than women to engage in reckless health behaviors such as smoking or drinking over the life course, and these patterns are most acute among men who do not have wives to curb their unhealthy behaviors.²⁴ Men also are more likely to lack close confiding relationships with persons other than their spouses.²⁵ Women tend to provide more emotional support to their spouses than do men for women, so the absence or loss of a spouse may create a greater emotional void in men's lives. For these reasons, the married are generally characterized as having better psychological health than the single, divorced, or widowed, and these benefits are greater for men than for women.

Yet research on the protective effects of marriage typically contrasts married and “unmarried” adults, and neglects the distinctive and heterogeneous experiences of never-married versus formerly married (i.e., separated, divorced, or widowed) persons. For divorced or widowed women, the loss of a husband's income, his contributions to the maintenance of the home, and emotional and sexual intimacy may represent a distressing transition that warrants readjustment after a period of grief or psychological distress.²⁶ Never-married women, in contrast, have not experienced a potentially distressing change in marital status, and most are self-sufficient in terms of both financial security and maintaining a home.²⁷ Moreover, whereas divorced and widowed women may experience “desolation”

or a decline in social engagement and increase in social isolation after the loss of their partner, single women often have long-established, enduring patterns of social interaction that protect them against psychological distress.²⁸ To more fully document the linkage between marital status and psychological well-being, I contrast the distinctive emotional experiences of never-married, formerly married, currently married, and currently cohabiting women.

A second line of inquiry examines whether marriage actually provides psychological benefits, or whether the emotionally and physically healthy are more likely to marry, remain married, or remarry following widowhood or divorce. The “social selection” hypothesis holds that the observed statistical relationship between marriage and well-being is due to distinctive characteristics of those who marry (or remarry), such as emotional well-being, good physical health, positive health behaviors, desirable personality traits, and rich socioeconomic resources.²⁹ For the most part, recent empirical findings have supported the social causation perspective, that is, marital status causes psychological well-being rather than the reverse.³⁰

Examinations of gender differences in the psychological consequences of marriage and singlehood, and evaluations of the social selection versus social causation hypotheses, are important, yet they do little to advance understanding of the linkages between marital status and well-being, particularly in an era when gender-typed social roles in marriage are beginning to blur, and social changes in values and attitudes have created a context in which the meaning and desirability of marriage have shifted.³¹ The linkage between marital status and women’s well-being may reflect a broader range of influences, including personal evaluations of the importance of marriage as a social institution; social support from persons other than one’s spouse or romantic partner; sexual orientation, given that most lesbians are unable to marry even if they wish to do so; and changes in the meaning and desirability of marriage over both historical time and personal time.

The Importance of Marriage as a Cultural and Personal Ideal

Marriage represents the attainment of a cherished and (arguably) compulsory cultural ideal; conforming to a widely held ideal, in turn, may enhance psychological well-being. The experience of marriage (and romantic love) is idealized in modern Western cultures and is conceptualized as a transcendent state that marks the completion of a quest for one’s intended other.³² Developmental psychologists argue further that marriage is a necessary precondition for healthy emotional adjustment in adulthood. Marrying and having children are considered critical “developmental tasks,” or anticipated and normative life stages, for young adults.³³ Erik Erikson’s stage model of successful adult development proposes that young adults must resolve the challenge of intimacy versus isolation; the former involves the establishment of an enduring, committed, and emotionally intimate relationship with a romantic partner.³⁴ Failure to resolve this crisis prevents young adults from progressing to the next developmental stage, and thus one’s emotional maturation is stalled.

The formation of a lasting romantic relationship is considered a critical source of women's emotional adjustment and maturity, and a more powerful source of identity than it is for men. The psychologist Jean Baker Miller has argued that women define themselves through relationships with others: "women's sense of self becomes very much organized around being able to make and then . . . maintain relationships. . . . Eventually, for many women the threat of disruption of connections is perceived not as just a loss of a relationship but as something closer to the loss of the self." Consequently, the "failure" to establish or maintain an enduring romantic relationship may threaten women's sense of identity, emotional security, and competence.³⁵

Remaining single—or dissolving a marriage—also may have psychological costs for women because it signifies the failure to achieve a goal that is strongly endorsed by social norms and institutions. Conforming to social expectations—such as marrying and remaining married—may provide psychological rewards via two pathways. First, conforming to widely held expectations may bring social approval or subtle rewards from significant others. Social approval, in turn, may foster positive views of the self. Second, the individual may internalize societal norms and expectations: "the individual thus becomes his [or her] own judge, approving or disapproving of his behavior in terms of internal standards."³⁶ The discordance between one's own experiences and either the expectations of others or of one's self is a powerful (negative) predictor of psychological well-being. A discrepancy between one's current situation and the situation to which one aspires is associated with depression and self-criticism, whereas a discrepancy between one's current situation and the expectations imposed by others may create anxiety.³⁷

The societal expectation that marriage is a desirable and normative life transition has a further consequence for unmarried persons: they may be stigmatized and judged negatively by others. A burgeoning literature on single stigma, or singlism, reveals that the failure to marry is viewed as indicative of a moral or character flaw, and as such, single persons are subject to stereotyping, prejudice, and both interpersonal and institutional discrimination.³⁸ Surveys and quasi-experimental studies reveal that single women are evaluated as less attractive, moral, emotionally stable, loyal, responsible, and dependable than their married peers and also are more likely to report that they have been subject to interpersonal discrimination and mistreatment.³⁹ Individuals who are mistreated or stigmatized by others may internalize the belief that they are unworthy or undesirable and may develop a compromised sense of self-esteem as a result.⁴⁰

Despite widespread denigration of singlehood and both attitudinal and behavioral support for marriage (more than 90 percent of American adults still marry), some individuals may be less committed to the marriage ideal and may believe that singlehood is an equally desirable state. For these individuals, remaining single may represent a conscious life choice at best—and at worst an undesired status, but one that is not evaluated as inferior to being married. Past research on the psychological consequences of marriage has not addressed the possibility that marriage is a less cherished and compulsory goal for some; the neglect of this factor may overstate the psychological costs of singlehood. Thus, I

examine whether the psychological costs of singlehood attenuate when attitudes about the desirability of marriage are considered.

Sexual Orientation

The goal of marriage is simply unattainable for most American gays and lesbians, regardless of their preferences for such a union. I know of no studies of marital status differences in psychological health that have acknowledged that gays and lesbians are included in their samples of unmarried individuals and that the linkage between singlehood and psychological health may in part reflect the experiences of gay individuals. According to recent estimates, between 3 and 10 percent of the United States population self-identifies as homosexual or bisexual, and most of these individuals have either never married or are cohabiting with a romantic partner.⁴¹ Although this proportion is small enough so that it cannot account fully for the link between singlehood and psychological well-being, sexual orientation may be one pathway that partially accounts for the psychological disadvantage of the never married. Gays and lesbians face distinctive stressors, including homophobia, discrimination, and the lack of public acknowledgment of their romantic relationships—especially when the relationship dissolves.⁴² Consequently, I examine whether the linkage between singlehood and psychological well-being attenuates when sexual orientation is controlled.

Social Support and Sexual Intimacy

Marriage is believed to enhance psychological health by providing sexual and emotional intimacy. Married women typically report higher levels of sexual satisfaction than their unmarried peers, reflecting the fact that married women have continuous and proximate access to a committed, exclusive, and long-term sexual relationship.⁴³ Surprisingly, researchers have not investigated systematically whether sexual satisfaction accounts for unmarried women's disadvantaged psychological health. In this chapter, I investigate whether the marriage gap in women's psychological health is attributable to differences in married and unmarried women's satisfaction with their sexual lives.

Although unmarried women may not have regular access to a sexual partner and confidante, they may adapt by actively pursuing and maintaining platonic friendships and relationships with other relatives and romantic relationships with a nonmarital partner. The substitution theory of relationships holds that in the absence of a spouse or children, unmarried individuals will turn to more remote kin, such as siblings or parents. When these relatives are not available, other close relationships, such as friends, are substituted.⁴⁴ Because their social networks are often more expansive and diverse than those of their married peers, never-married women have been found to be more socially integrated than other women—based on an “isolation index” assessing frequency of visits with neighbors, number of friends living in the neighborhood, and feelings of being part of their communities.⁴⁵

For never-married and formerly married women, friendships may provide many of the same emotional rewards as marriage. Research on social support shows persuasively that having a single confidante is of greater value in addressing an individual's emotional needs than having several superficial friendships or a tenuous and troubled marital relationship.⁴⁶ Friendships are particularly rewarding and intimate for women; thus the psychological disadvantage experienced by unmarried women may be less pronounced when social and emotional support from friends is considered.⁴⁷ I therefore explore whether the psychological disadvantage associated with singlehood persists when I adjust for an unmarried woman's contact with and emotional support from friends and neighbors, and her satisfaction with a sexual relationship.

Do the Benefits of Marriage Change over Historical and Personal Time?

Research on the protective effects of marriage is based on the implicit assumption that the meaning and psychological consequences of marriage are constant over historical time and personal time. However, historical shifts in the meaning, desirability, and necessity of marriage may have created a context in which marriage may affect psychological health differently for different birth cohorts.

A birth cohort is a group of individuals born at the same point in history and who "experience the same event within the time interval."⁴⁸ Given their shared age at a given point in history, members of a birth cohort face similar opportunities and constraints as they pass through the life course. For instance, women's educational attainment, labor force participation, and earnings relative to men have increased steadily over the past fifty years.⁴⁹ Thus, current cohorts of young women are far more likely than their mothers to have achieved economic independence and may be less compelled to marry (or remain married) for purely economic reasons.

Members of a birth cohort also share a unique cultural lens or a "set of cognitive and evaluative beliefs about what is or what ought to be."⁵⁰ A cohort is most likely to develop a set of beliefs that are distinct from those of preceding cohorts during periods marked by rapid social changes, such as stark changes in gender roles in the home and workplace over the past forty years.⁵¹ The Baby Bust (b. 1960–1970), Baby Boom (b. 1944–1959), and Silent Generation (b. 1931–1943) birth cohorts may hold very different motivations and preferences for marriage. As noted earlier, gender role shifts in the family and workplace—combined with delayed and decreased fertility—mean that the functional bases for marriage are less acute for members of younger cohorts relative to those of older cohorts.⁵² Increasing acceptance of nontraditional family forms, such as cohabitation, and changing attitudes toward the acceptability of nonmarital sex have created a context in which young women and men today may receive many of the benefits of marriage without actually entering a legal union.⁵³ Moreover, although marriage was once perceived as a permanent bond broken only by death, it is now viewed as a potentially temporary bond that could be severed through separation and divorce. For these reasons,

singlehood and marital dissolution may pose fewer psychological costs to members of the Baby Boom and Baby Bust cohorts than for those persons who came of age in the 1940s and 1950s.

Expectations for married life also have changed, however, and may make marital dissolution more difficult for members of younger birth cohorts. Greater gender-based equality in both the home and workplace today means that women and men no longer seek out a “helpmate” to fulfill the instrumental and expressive marital roles traditionally performed by members of the opposite sex.⁵⁴ Rather, the bases of spouse selection today are more likely to include individual preferences (rather than a choice endorsed or selected by parents or community members), love, shared interests, and the idealized notion of a “soul mate.”⁵⁵ When the marriage ends, then, the divorced or widowed survivor must grapple with both the loss of a partner and the recognition that their idealized union has failed. For these reasons, members of the younger birth cohorts may be affected more powerfully by the loss of partner, whether through divorce or widowhood.

The psychological consequences of marriage also may vary at different stages in the life course. First, most Americans believe that there is an “appropriate” time line for making important life transitions, such as marriage. A person who has not yet married by their fifties is committing a more powerful normative violation than is a person in their twenties who has never married; being out of step with one’s peers and with prevailing expectations may take a psychological toll.⁵⁶ Moreover, structural constraints often make it particularly difficult for women to marry at older ages. The imbalanced gender ratio at older ages, combined with men’s preferences for younger partners, may preclude older women from marrying, even if they are positively disposed to the idea.⁵⁷ Consequently, singlehood may be particularly distressing to older women.⁵⁸

Second, the need and desire for a spouse may wax and wane over the life course; midlife and older adults are less likely to require either the homemaking or breadwinning services of a partner. Boundaries demarcating traditional gender-typed roles in marriage become blurred as adults age. Midlife and older adults are no longer responsible for the daily care of young children, a task that falls largely to women in young and mid-adulthood.⁵⁹ The onset of physical health problems may render older adults less able to manage the specialized homemaking, home maintenance, or breadwinning roles that they performed earlier in the life course.⁶⁰ Consequently, for midlife and older adults the absence of a spouse may pose less of a challenge than it does for younger adults, who are more likely to be grappling with the current and competing demands of paid employment and childrearing.

To evaluate the proposition that marital status may affect psychological health differently across birth cohorts and life stages, I examine whether the linkage between marital status and psychological distress, self-esteem, and depressive symptoms is significantly different for women of three different birth cohorts (and life course stages): Baby Bust (b. 1960–1970, age thirty-five and younger in 1995), Baby Boom (b. 1944–1959, age thirty-six to fifty-one in 1995), and Silent Generation (b. 1931–1943, age fifty-two to sixty-four in 1995) cohorts.

Emotional Well-Being of Single Women in the Contemporary United States: Empirical Evidence Data and Analytic Plan

My objective is to investigate whether never-married, cohabiting, and formerly married women differ from currently married women in their reports of depressive symptoms, psychological distress, and self-esteem. (Table 3.1 provides further detail on each of the three well-being measures.) I examine data from the Midlife Development in the United States (MIDUS) survey, a random sample survey of more than three thousand men and women ages twenty-five to seventy-four in 1995.⁶¹ The analyses explore whether women's psychological health is shaped by their marital status and the reasons why women's marital status affects their current well-being. Specifically, I consider four potential pathways that may account for the widely documented linkage between marriage and women's well-being: friendships, including frequency of visits with friends and availability of emotional support from friends; sexual orientation; satisfaction with one's sex life; and adherence to the cultural view that marriage is more desirable than singlehood.

First, I conduct bivariate analyses to identify variations in women's psychological well-being by marital status. Second, I evaluate the extent to which marital status differences in psychological well-being persist after I adjust for possible confounding or "selection" characteristics. Selection characteristics refer to those personal characteristics that affect the likelihood that one ever marries or remains married, such as early life health, educational attainment, and race. Past studies have revealed that African Americans, persons with poor physical health, and persons with lower levels of education and occupational status are less likely to marry and more likely to divorce or become widowed, compared to whites, persons with excellent physical health, and highly educated persons.⁶² I control for these potential selection characteristics in my analysis because they also are well-documented influences on one's psychological health.⁶³ Statistical models that do not adjust for these characteristics could overstate the negative psychological consequences of singlehood. Third, I evaluate whether marital status differences in psychological well-being persist after I adjust for each of the potential pathway variables described earlier (i.e., friendship, sexual orientation, sexual satisfaction, and attitudes toward marriage). Finally, I evaluate whether the relationship between marital status and psychological well-being varies for three distinctive cohorts of women: Baby Bust (b. 1960–1970), Baby Boom (b. 1944–1959), and Silent Generation (b. 1931–1943) women. An overarching theme of this chapter is that the meaning and desirability of singlehood (and marriage) shift both over historical time and over the personal life course. As such, both the emotional benefits and disadvantages of marriage and singlehood may vary based on one's birth cohort or generation.

Bivariate Results

The bivariate analyses (shown in table 3.2) provide a statistical portrait of each of the four marital-status groups: currently married, cohabiting, never-married, and formerly married (i.e., separated, divorced, or widowed) women. Asterisks denote whether a marital status category differs significantly from the

TABLE 3.1 *Scales used in analysis*

| | |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <p>Psychological distress ($\alpha = .87$)</p> | <p>During the past 30 days, how much of the time did you feel:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • so sad nothing could cheer you up • nervous • restless or fidgety • hopeless • that everything was an effort • worthless <p>Response categories range from 1 (none of the time) to 5 (all of the time).</p> |
| <p>Self-acceptance ($\alpha = .62$)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I like most parts of my personality. • When I look at the story of my life, I am pleased with how things have turned out so far. • In many ways I feel disappointed about my achievements in life (reverse coded). <p>Response categories range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).</p> |
| <p>Depressive symptoms in the past 12 months</p> | <p>A diagnosis of Major Depression requires a period of at least two weeks of depressed mood most of the day, nearly every day, and at least four other symptoms typically found to accompany depression, including problems with eating, sleeping, energy, concentration, feelings of self-worth, and suicidal thoughts or actions.</p> |
| <p>Positive emotional support ($\alpha = .88$)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How much do your friends really care about you? • How much do they understand the way you feel about things? • How much can you rely on them for help if you have a serious problem? • How much can you open up to them if you need to talk about your worries? <p>Response categories range from 1 (not at all) to 4 (a lot).</p> |
| <p>Frequency of contact with friends</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How often are you in contact with any of your friends—including visits, phone calls, letters, or electronic mail messages? <p>Response categories range from 1 (never or hardly ever) to 8 (several times a day).</p> |
| <p>Sexual orientation</p> | <p>How would you describe your sexual orientation?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heterosexual (sexually attracted only to the opposite sex). • Homosexual (sexually attracted to only your own sex), or bisexual (sexually attracted to both men and women). |
| <p>Satisfaction with one's sex life</p> | <p>How would you rate the sexual aspect of your life these days?</p> <p>Response categories range from 0 (worst possible situation) to 10 (best possible situation)</p> |
| <p>Attitudes toward marriage ($\alpha = .85$)</p> | <p>Indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women can have full and happy lives without marrying. • Men can have fully and happy lives without marrying. |

TABLE 3.2 *Descriptive statistics by marital status, women of the MIDUS survey*

| | Total sample | Currently married | Cohabiting | Never married | Formerly married |
|------------------------------------------------|------------------|-------------------|--------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| <i>Dependent variables</i> | | | | | |
| Depression (two-week spell) in the past year | .17 (.37) | .14 (.34) | .17 (.38) | .21* (.41) | .21*** (.41) |
| Psychological distress in the past two weeks | 1.63 (.67) | 1.57 (.64) | 1.67 (.64) | 1.73** (.69) | 1.70*** (.73) |
| Self-acceptance | 5.40 (1.19) | 5.53 (1.15) | 5.44 (1.32) | 5.27*** (1.21) | 5.19*** (1.19) |
| <i>Independent variables</i> | | | | | |
| Selection characteristics | | | | | |
| Mental health was fair/poor at age 16 | .09 (.28) | .07 (.25) | .13* (.34) | .14*** (.35) | .093 (.29) |
| Physical health was fair/poor at age 16 | .04 (.21) | .04 (.19) | .05 (.22) | .07* (.25) | .05 (.22) |
| Current physical health (10 = best; 0 = worst) | 7.35 (1.72) | 7.40 (1.66) | 7.29 (1.75) | 7.30 (1.73) | 7.29 (1.82) |
| <i>Demographics</i> | | | | | |
| Age | 47.16 (13.29) | 46.71 (12.80) | 37.34*** (9.96) | 37.92*** (11.99) | 52.99*** (12.08) |
| Race (1 = black; 0 = white or other) | .14 (.35) | .11 (.31) | .18* (.39) | .28*** (.45) | .16** (.37) |
| <i>Educational attainment</i> | | | | | |
| Less than 12 years | .09 (.29) | .08 (.27) | .09 (.28) | .08 (.27) | .12** (.33) |
| 12 years | .31 (.46) | .34 (.47) | .34 (.48) | .17** (.38) | .30 (.46) |
| 13–15 years | .33 (.47) | .31 (.46) | .39 (.49) | .26 (.44) | .37* (.48) |
| 16 or more years | .28 (.45) | .28 (.45) | .18 (.39) | .49*** (.50) | .21** (.41) |

(continued)

Table 3.2. (continued)

| | Total sample | Currently married | Cohabiting | Never married | Formerly married |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|----------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| <i>Current/most recent occupation</i> | | | | | |
| Upper white collar | .26 (.44) | .25 (.43) | .18 (.39) | .40*** (.49) | .25 (.43) |
| Lower white collar | .29 (.45) | .29 (.45) | .39* (.49) | .25 (.43) | .29 (.45) |
| Blue collar | .07 (.25) | .07 (.25) | .11 (.31) | .04 (.20) | .07 (.26) |
| Full-time worker, current/last job | .51 (.50) | .44 (.50) | .67*** (.47) | .68*** (.40) | .49 (.25) |
| Own income (natural log) | 8.77 (2.01) | 8.53 (2.08) | 9.29*** (1.70) | 9.42*** (1.66) | 8.94*** (1.98) |
| Income missing/DK | .05 (.22) | .05 (.21) | .02 (.16) | .05 (.21) | .07 (.26) |
| <i>Emotional support</i> | | | | | |
| Frequency of visits with friends (8 = highest) | 5.75 (1.68) | 5.59 (1.23) | 5.40 (1.91) | 6.11*** (1.53) | 5.96*** (1.69) |
| Positive emotional support from friends (4 = highest) | 3.34 (.67) | 3.33 (.65) | 3.35 (.72) | 3.39 (.68) | 3.33 (.65) |
| <i>Sexuality</i> | | | | | |
| Lesbian or bisexual | .02 (.15) | .01 (.09) | .07*** (.26) | .09*** (.29) | .02 (.12) |
| Satisfaction with current sex life (10 = highest) | 5.19 (3.23) | 5.99 (2.84) | 7.10*** (2.63) | 4.46*** (2.94) | 3.61*** (3.42) |
| No report of sexual satisfaction (1 = missing) | .05 (.21) | .02 (.14) | .01 (.11) | .05** (.22) | .09*** (.29) |
| <i>Cultural evaluation of marriage</i> | | | | | |
| Believes singlehood is acceptable (7 = greatest acceptance) | 5.64 (1.54) | 5.58 (1.57) | 5.97* (1.26) | 5.96*** (1.23) | 5.58 (1.61) |

(continued)

Table 3.2. (continued)

| | Total sample | Currently married | Cohabiting | Never married | Formerly married |
|---------------------------------------|--------------|-------------------|------------|---------------|------------------|
| Percentage in marital status category | 100 | 56 | 4.6 | 11 | 29 |
| N | 1,785 | 1,000 | 82 | 189 | 514 |

Source: MIDUS survey, 1995.

Notes: Two-tailed t-tests were conducted to evaluate marital status differences, where “currently married” is the reference group. Unstandardized regression coefficients and standard errors are presented.

* $p > .05$; ** $p > .01$; *** $p > .001$.

“currently married” (reference category) in terms of important psychological, demographic, and socioeconomic characteristics.

Never-married and formerly married women fare worse than their married peers in all three dimensions of psychological health. They are significantly more likely to have experienced a two-week spell of depression in the past year (21 percent versus 14 percent for currently married women), and they report significantly more psychological distress. Never-married women have significantly lower self-acceptance scores than either married or cohabiting women, yet they still fare better than separated, divorced, or widowed women.

Women with poor physical and mental health during their adolescent years are less likely than healthier women to marry in the first place. Never-married women are significantly more likely than their married peers to report that they were in poor mental and physical health at age sixteen. Although married women enjoy better physical and mental health than single women, unmarried women enjoy richer work lives and higher personal earnings. Never-married and cohabiting women are significantly more likely than the married to be working full time for pay, and they (and formerly married) also report significantly greater personal income than married women. Never-married women are far more likely than all other women to have at least a four-year college degree and to work in an upper-level white-collar (i.e., professional or managerial) occupation. These findings are consistent with data spanning more than a century, which show that never-married women are particularly successful in terms of their own educational and career pursuits.⁶⁴

Unmarried women have an additional resource that distinguishes them from married women: more frequent social contact with friends. Both never-married and formerly married women report more frequent visits with friends, suggesting that unmarried women are adaptive and will find ways to fulfill their social needs—even if outside of marriage. However, women do not vary widely in terms of the emotional support they receive from friends, regardless of marital status.

The sexual lives of unmarried women also differ starkly from those of married women. Women who have never entered a legal union (i.e., the never married and cohabiting) are significantly more likely than married women to be gay or bisexual. Nine percent of never-married women and 7 percent of cohabiting women report that they are lesbians or bisexual. Interestingly, the three groups of unmarried women vary widely in terms of how satisfied they are in their sexual relationships. Cohabiting women report significantly greater sexual satisfaction than married women do, yet women without regular access to a sex partner (i.e., the never married and formerly married) report much lower satisfaction with their sex lives. Women without regular access to a sexual partner also are the most likely to simply skip the sexual satisfaction question; 5 percent of never-married and 9 percent of formerly married women did not answer the question. They may feel that they cannot evaluate the quality of their sex life if they do not have a regular partner.

Unmarried women report much greater acceptance of singlehood than do married women; this may reflect the process of “dissonance reduction.” People tend to report attitudes and cognitions that mesh with their current behaviors in order to avoid the uncomfortable feeling of cognitive dissonance.⁶⁵ Unmarried women may find it distressing to strongly endorse a social institution that they are not a part of, whereas married women may enhance their sense of self-worth by elevating the importance of their marital relationship.

Multivariate Analyses

Does marital status affect psychological well-being? The next objective is to evaluate whether the marital status differences in psychological health documented in the bivariate analysis persist when social selection and socioeconomic status characteristics are adjusted. Does marital status affect psychological well-being? A summary of regression coefficients is presented in table 3.3. Model 1 in table 3.3 presents the unadjusted effects of marital status on the three psychological well-being indicators, and model 2 presents the effects after adjusting for demographic, health, and socioeconomic status characteristics. The results in model 2 reveal that never-married and formerly married women still fare worse than the married in terms of both elevated psychological distress ($b = .12$ and $.14$, respectively) and lower self-acceptance ($b = -.30$ and $-.33$, respectively), after selection characteristics are adjusted. Formerly married women are more than twice as likely as married women to have had a recent depressive spell.

Why and how does marital status affect psychological well-being? To identify the causal pathway(s) linking marital status to distress, self-acceptance, and depression, I estimate regression models that adjust for social selection characteristics and each of the following pathway variables: attitudes toward marriage, frequency of visits with friends, emotional support from friends, sexual satisfaction, and sexual orientation. If the effect of marital status declines or is no longer statistically significant after a potential mediator is added to the regression model, then the link between marital status and well-being is at least partially attributable to that mediator.

The results in rows 3–8 of table 3.3 show how the linkage between marital status and psychological well-being attenuates when possible pathway variables are controlled. Surprisingly, not attitudes toward marriage, relationships with friends, nor sexual orientation explains the linkage between marriage and psychological well-being.⁶⁶ Neither the size nor statistical significance of the marital status coefficients changes appreciably in these models. However, satisfaction with one's sexual life fully accounts for never-married women's disadvantage in terms of psychological distress and self-acceptance, and nearly "explains away" the disadvantage reported by formerly married women. However, sexual satisfaction does not account for formerly married women's elevated risk of depression, although this risk declines slightly (from 2.1 to 1.9) after sexual satisfaction is controlled.

Next, I evaluated whether the effect of singlehood on psychological health differed for women of the Silent Generation, Baby Boom, and Baby Bust cohorts. Surprisingly, the analyses revealed that never-married women enjoy similar levels of self-acceptance, regardless of their generation and life stage. In contrast, the self-esteem levels of formerly married women (i.e., divorced or widowed) varied based on their cohort and/or life stage. Among formerly married women, self-esteem levels are lowest among the Baby Boom and Baby Bust generations; this may reflect the fact that older women anticipate becoming widowed, and thus losing a spouse may not take the toll that it does on younger women. Moreover, older women may have had more time to adjust to their changed marital status. Marital dissolution also may be particularly difficult for those generations of women who were socialized to believe that their life partner should be a unique and idealized soul mate rather than a helpmate.⁶⁷

Discussion

In this essay I have investigated the pathways linking marital status to psychological well-being among American women in the late twentieth century. Three important patterns emerged from the analysis. First, unmarried cohabiting women do not differ from their married peers in terms of the three psychological outcomes, after social selection and socioeconomic status are controlled. Second, level of satisfaction with sexual intimacy is the most powerful explanation for the psychological health disadvantage among unmarried women. Third, I found weak support for the proposition that the psychological consequences of singlehood vary by life stage or birth cohort.

Cohabiting women are similar to the currently married in terms of self-acceptance, psychological distress, and depression risk, after social selection characteristics are taken into consideration. Previous studies have portrayed cohabiting unions as less stable and less satisfying than legal marriages: Waite and Gallagher observe that "cohabitation is a halfway house for people who do not want the degree of personal and social commitment that marriage represents," whereas Booth and colleagues characterize cohabitants as persons who will go on to have poorer-quality marriages and higher rates of marital dissolution than their peers who did not cohabit before marriage.⁶⁸ However, these claims are based largely

TABLE 3.3 Summary of regression analyses: Effect of marital status on women's psychological well-being, after adjusting potential pathway variables

| | OLS regression | | | | Logistic regression | | | | | | | |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|------------------|-----------------|------------------|----------------------------------|------------------|----------------|-----|-------|---------|------|------------|
| | Psychological distress | | Self-acceptance | | Depressive spell, past 12 months | | Chi-sq.; DF | | | | | |
| | Never married | Formerly married | Never married | Formerly married | Never married | Formerly married | | | | | | |
| Model 1. Unadjusted effects of marital status | .16** (.05) | .13*** (.04) | .02 (.08) | .01 | -.26** (.09) | -.34*** (.06) | -.09 (.14) | .02 | 1.65* | 1.69*** | 1.29 | 15.7; 3 |
| Model 2. Adjusting for selection, socioeconomic status, and demographic characteristics | .12* (.05) | .14*** (.03) | .01 (.07) | .19 | -.30*** (.09) | -.33*** (.06) | .02 (.13) | .13 | 1.23 | 2.09*** | .94 | 148; 16 |
| Model 2 + cultural evaluation of marriage | .12* (.05) | .14*** (.03) | .02 (.07) | .19 | -.31*** (.09) | -.33*** (.06) | .01 (.13) | .13 | 1.23 | 2.10*** | .93 | 148; 17 |
| Model 2 + frequency of visits with friends | .13** (.05) | .15*** (.04) | .01 (.07) | .20 | -.34*** (.09) | -.37*** (.06) | .03 (.13) | .14 | 1.23 | 2.09*** | .64 | 148; 17 |

| | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|------------------------------------------------|---------------|-----------------|--------------|-----|------------------|------------------|---------------|-----|------|---------|-----|------------|
| Model 2 + emotional support from friends | .13* (.05) | .14*** (.03) | .02 (.07) | .21 | -.32*** (.09) | -.34*** (.06) | -.01 (.13) | .16 | 1.23 | 2.10*** | .94 | 148; 17 |
| Model 2 + sexual orientation | .12* (.05) | .14*** (.03) | .02 (.07) | .19 | -.31*** (.09) | -.33*** (.06) | .01 (.13) | .13 | 1.21 | 2.10*** | .93 | 148; 17 |
| Model 2 + satisfaction with sex life | .05 (.05) | .06 (.04) | .04 (.07) | .22 | -.11 (.09) | -.14* (.06) | -.05 (.13) | .17 | 1.12 | 1.89*** | .97 | 154; 18 |
| Model 2 + all five potential pathway variables | .06 (.05) | .07 (.04) | .05 (.07) | .23 | -.12 (.09) | -.18** (.06) | -.06 (.13) | .20 | 1.08 | 1.86*** | .96 | 155; 22 |

Source: MIDUS survey, 1995.

Notes: N = 1,785. Unstandardized regression coefficients, standard errors, and adjusted R² values are presented for OLS regression models. Odds ratios and chi-square statistics are presented for logistic regression models.

* $p > .05$; ** $p > .01$; *** $p > .001$.

on research conducted with generations of adults who cohabited in the 1970s and 1980s. Cohabitation is a much more common and widely accepted practice today and has become a rite of passage for most young women and men. More than half of all women who married during the earlier 1990s had cohabited before their marriage.⁶⁹ Rather than a refuge for those who lack the economic or emotional resources to marry, cohabitation has become an accepted life course stage between dating and marriage that provides many of the same emotional and sexual rewards as legal marriage.⁷⁰

An unanticipated yet intriguing finding was the extent to which sexual satisfaction “explained away” the psychological disadvantage of unmarried women. When sexual satisfaction was controlled, the psychological disadvantage associated with being never married or formerly married either attenuated considerably or was accounted for fully. Although friends and relatives may provide many of the important social and instrumental benefits of marriage, sexual intimacy may be a unique attribute of the marital (or cohabiting) relationship. Marriage, and romantic relationships more generally, have been characterized in terms of the presence or absence of three critical components: emotional intimacy, commitment, and passion.⁷¹ In Sternberg’s (1988) “triangular model of marriage,” the most satisfying and enduring unions encompass all three components; marriages that lack sexual passion are believed to be conceptually similar to close and enduring friendships.

My analyses also showed that the psychological consequences of marital dissolution (i.e., divorce and widowhood) were less deleterious to women in the oldest birth cohort than to those in the younger two cohorts. This finding may reflect several factors. First, marital dissolution—usually through widowhood—is an anticipated social transition for older women. Because women are more likely than men to outlive their spouses, they experience anticipatory socialization by watching their peers adjust to the loss of a spouse.⁷² Thus, older women are better equipped and prepared for the loss of spouse. In general, anticipated life transitions are less distressing than unexpected ones.⁷³ Second, the younger cohorts may have a more idealized view of marriage, given that younger cohorts are more likely than older generations to have received minimal input from family or community members in the choosing of a partner and more likely to have envisioned their life partner as their one and only “intended.”⁷⁴ The dashed expectations of the younger two generations may contribute to their lower self-esteem.

Surprisingly, never-married women across three very different generations—Baby Bust, Baby Boom, and the Silent Generation—had similar levels of psychological well-being. Although the economic and instrumental benefits of marriage have shifted over the past half century, making marriage less of a practical necessity, cultural norms still encourage and elevate the pursuit of an enduring romantic relationship with one’s “intended other.”⁷⁵ Popular culture in the early twenty-first century, exemplified in the recent spate of “reality” television shows portraying young adults’ very public pursuit of spouses, underscores the pervasiveness of the cultural message that marriage is still a sought-after and irreplaceable goal for healthy heterosexual women.⁷⁶

Limitations

The analysis presented in this chapter has several limitations and omissions that should be pursued in future studies. First, I considered a limited range of outcome measures. Future analyses should consider whether the physical health and economic advantages associated with marriage and singlehood shift across birth cohorts and over the life span. Other indicators of negative psychological health, including substance abuse, anxiety, or loneliness, as well as positive indicators such as personal growth and autonomy also should be considered. Second, marital status was conceptualized here as a social role; I did not directly address the possibility that divorce and remarriage also may be conceptualized as stressful life events. The psychological distress associated with divorce and widowhood is typically most acute shortly after one's transition from married to formerly married occurs. For instance, although most widowed persons experience a spell of depressed mood, these effects are usually limited to the first twelve months following loss.⁷⁷ Future studies should examine whether the formerly married differ from the never and currently married along important psychological characteristics at different time points after their transition.

Finally, because the MIDUS data are cross-sectional, it is not possible to ascertain definitively whether the consequences of marriage differ across birth cohort or the life span—although both possibilities are equally plausible. Future replications of this study should rely on multi-wave multi-cohort data. Such efforts will be valuable; marital values, attitudes, and behaviors are molded by historical and social-legal context. Gergen and others have observed that the cultural consensus about gender and marriage has “deteriorated” in recent years and that current cohorts of young adults are “redefining cultural rules about being spouses.”⁷⁸ As cultural rules shift, both expectations for and the rewards associated with singlehood, marriage, and other relationship forms may shift accordingly.

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