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**Not a Single Meaning:
Definition and Evolution of Singlehood in France and the United States**

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Abstract

Singlehood appears to be an understudied topic in the social sciences, and a particularly diverse field of research. Focusing on the United States and France, this article reviews existing literature to answer three questions that are prerequisites for theorizing singlehood (1) *What is singlehood?* We first discuss the diversity of terms used in ordinary language to designate singles, and the different statistical measures that coexist in the scholarly literature. (2) *Who and how many are single?* We show that different definitions lead to different counts of the single population and discuss the driving forces behind the rise in singlehood. (3) *What is new?* Drawing on literature on the couple norm and the single lifestyle, we then turn to the question of the specificity of the contemporary era. In the last section, we discuss the implications for theorizing singlehood. The answers to all three questions lead us to promote a life course approach to singlehood.

Keywords: Singlehood, Life Course, Theory, United States, France

Introduction

Singlehood has multiple meanings. Several definitions co-exist in the social sciences and make for a diverse field of research. When authors write of singlehood, they do not always refer to the same social phenomenon or the same group of people and, consequently, their findings and conclusions often differ. This conceptual diversity and instability is a challenge to theory building. What is singlehood and how has it changed? The answers to these questions differ significantly depending on the definition.

This article seeks to highlight the various ways of framing and measuring singlehood, and the implications for studying historical change. The aim is to point out the range of approaches to singlehood in the social scientific literature, but also to critically discuss them. To do so, we review empirical research on the demographics and the evolution of singlehood. We are interested not so much in studies on the individual experiences of single life (behaviours and attitudes), but rather in research on the broad historical trends with regard to the scope, the rate, and the social meaning of singlehood. The literature review therefore focuses primarily, but not exclusively, on research within history, demography and quantitative sociology. Historical trends of course differ between countries. We present research on France and the United States in order to highlight national specificities but also evolutions that are common to both countries and more broadly to several countries in the Western world.

More precisely, we seek to answer three questions that in our view are prerequisites for theorizing contemporary singlehood. First, *what is singlehood?* We start by looking at terms for naming singlehood and the definitions used in the social sciences, taking particular interest in how these have changed over time. *Who and how many are single?* The second part of the paper looks at the share of singles in the general population, showing that measures differ depending

on the definition, and reviews the driving forces behind the rise in singlehood. *What is new?* Drawing on literature on the couple norm and the single lifestyle, this section discusses the specificity of the contemporary era and questions the idea that singlehood is a new way of life. Lastly, we discuss the implications of this literature review in a fourth section. The answers to all three questions lead us to promote a life course perspective on singlehood that, in our view, remains underdeveloped in this field of research. We invite social scientists to move from a population approach to a biographic perspective, by switching the attention from singles as a group to singlehood as a period of life.

Background

Singlehood appears to be a relatively understudied topic in the social sciences. Between January 2019 and January 2023, Google scholar had registered 3,220 scientific articles in English with a title containing “singlehood,” compared to 167,000 articles titled with the word “marriage,” making for a ratio of 1 to 50. A thorough bibliometric analysis, including other terms for naming single and couple life, would probably reinforce the imbalance that these figures imply. We believe that the centrality of marriage and couple life in Western societies has resulted in what one could call a “conjugal tropism” in family theory. Studies on intimate and family life focus predominantly on relationships in their various forms (marriage, cohabitation, LAT, same-sex couples, polyamorous relationships, etc.) and phases (union formation, family formation, separation, and repartnering), but give little attention to single life. Consequently, singlehood is often approached indirectly and negatively as an absence, in opposition to marriage or cohabitation, and as a state before, in between, or after the family events that make up the life course.

This conjugal tropism appears particularly pronounced in research based on quantitative methods. In demography, the focus on population patterns and reproduction has led to a specific interest in couple formation, which is historically closely linked to fertility behaviors (Lesthaeghe & Moors, 2000). In sociology, a growing body of qualitative research takes interest in the individual experiences of singlehood (Budgeon, 2008; Davies, 2003; Kislev, 2019; Klinenberg, 2012), especially among women (Kaufmann, 2008; Macvarish, 2006; Reynolds et al., 2007; Taylor, 2011), but studies on contemporary forms of singlehood are rarer in quantitative sociology. This does not mean that statistical studies entirely overlook the topic. A lot of research on couple life is indirectly informative of single life. Since the two are commonly understood as opposites, the former says something about the latter (e.g., the age at first union is at the same time the age of exiting singlehood). What is rare is rather quantitative studies that focus on singlehood as the primary topic of study, as well as statistical research that goes beyond the mere measure of singles to say something about the different *forms* of singlehood. Because social surveys include numerous questions on the nature of couple relationships (living arrangements, activities, satisfaction, etc.) but almost never any on the experience of singlehood (Rault et al., 2019), we know a lot more about the lives of partnered individuals than about those who are unpartnered.

Relatively scarce, research on singlehood is also diverse in terms of aim, scope and approach. This academic diversity is reflected in the lack of a shared definition. What do we mean by single? Is it individuals who are unmarried, who do not cohabit and/or who are not engaged in a committed relationship? There is no common answer to this question and, thus, no common ground for empirical investigation or theory building. Whereas historians interested in older time periods and long-running trends are required to define singlehood by marital status as

individuals who are never married or unmarried (Henry & Houdaille, 1978) a majority of sociological and demographic studies adopt a definition based on cohabitation, which means that singles are those who live alone or who do not live with a partner (Bellani et al., 2017; Sandström & Karlsson, 2019). In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to LAT relationships in both sociology and demography, allowing for a new definition of singlehood as individuals who are not in a committed relationship (Bastin, 2019; Bergström et al., 2019; Kislev, 2019). This article takes particular interest in this conceptual diversity. The first aim is to thoroughly review the competing definitions of singlehood and their implications for measuring and framing this phenomenon. In the following two sections, we first proceed by reviewing the competing definitions of singlehood, and then by demonstrating how they matter for measuring singlehood and assessing its historical evolution.

The diversity in research on singlehood also is evident in theory. There is a large variety of analytical perspectives and a wide range of rationales for looking into this topic, albeit one can detect three general and distinct entry points to the study of singlehood.

A first perspective considers singlehood as a product of inequality. The most emblematic example of this viewpoint is Pierre Bourdieu's book, *The Bachelors Ball* (2009), in which the French sociologist analyses the socioeconomic transformation at the turn of the 20th century and how it resulted in a new group of singles. Whereas the elder sons of landowning farming families were formally a privileged group, destined to inherit and marry, their social status fell drastically at this time and left them single. The focus of the analysis is social stratification and how it translates in matrimony. In a similar vein, a stream of more recent research takes interest in singlehood as an indicator of social inclusion or exclusion. The higher propensity of certain groups to either remain or become single is perceived as a sign of vulnerability. In the United

States, authors take special interest in racial inequalities and lower marital rates among the African American population (Banks, 2011; Clarke, 2011; Wilson, 1987), whereas in Europe the focus is more often on the educational gradient of singlehood (Bellani et al., 2017; Bouchet-Valat & Dutreuilh, 2015; Sandström & Karlsson, 2019). Within this perspective, singlehood is sometimes a secondary topic, or even a proxy, serving an argument focused on other issues, such as social stratification in sociology, or matrimony in historical demography for instance (Henry & Fleury, 1956).

A second viewpoint also relates to issues of inequality but sees singlehood as the very basis of exclusion. Rather than an expression of racial or social hierarchies, singlehood is in itself the source of marginalization. In this view, unpartnered individuals are subject to discrimination and are structurally disadvantaged due to pervasive matrimonial norms. Bella M. DePaulo (2006) coined the term “singlism” to refer to the shaming and stereotyping of single individuals, and the concept has since gained traction. The work of Sasha Roseneil and colleagues (2020) on *The Tenacity of the Couple Norm*, and Kinneret Lahads (2017), *Critical Reading of Singlehood, Gender and Time* are also interested in the vulnerability associated with singlehood. In contrast and in response to this viewpoint, several authors have stressed that the social sciences tend to put forward a rather miserable image of single people, especially women (Bette & Gonzalez-Quijano, 2016; Kaufmann, 1994; Kislev, 2019).

The third viewpoint is more positive. In this broad collection of research, the rise in singlehood is viewed as a part of a broader transformation of intimacy (Giddens, 1992). The growing proportion of singles is interpreted as the result of changing sexual norms, greater gender equality, and extended individualization (Bologne, 2004; Kislev, 2019; Klinenberg, 2012), and is considered “emblematic in many ways of modern Western societies because it

represents the importance conceded to the individual and to individual goals at the expense, basically, of the family” (Esteve et al., 2020, p. 169). Instead of enduring inequality, the focus here is on cultural change. Whereas the former viewpoints are common in history and sociology, this perspective is particularly frequent in demography as it embraces theories on the Second Demographic Transition, and the idea that population patterns (such as the rise in singlehood) are due to ideational change (Lesthaeghe, 1994, 2014; Zaidi & Morgan, 2017).

These are very different ways of questioning singlehood but they have one thing in common. A majority of social scientific studies rely on a “population” approach. This means that they approach – theoretically, methodologically and empirically – singles as *a group* that they seek to describe (although in different ways and for different reasons), most often by comparing them to non-single individuals. This approach has important limits and is losing its relevancy. As we will argue, contemporary singlehood is better understood as a period of life and requires more than ever that we adopt a life course perspective.

We come back to these different conceptions of singlehood in the two last sections of the paper. We show that different viewpoints lead to very different conclusions about what is specific about contemporary singlehood. We then elaborate on our suggestion to approach singlehood as a period of life rather than to consider singles as a population.

What is Singlehood?

The term “single” is polysemous in many languages and, conversely, there are different words for describing someone who is not in a relationship. This linguistic diversity adds considerable complexity for anyone seeking to provide a theoretical framework of singlehood, and great difficulties for those interested in historical or cross-national comparisons. Moreover, the

statistical categories used by social scientists to distinguish between those who are single and those who are not differ between countries and have changed over time. This section describes these different linguistic and statistical ways of defining singlehood.

Linguistic Polysemy

Whereas the term “couple” exists in most languages and refers, in a similar manner, to individuals involved in a romantic and/or marital relationship, there is no linguistic unity for describing individuals who are not in this situation. The English term “singlehood” does not always have a direct translation, and certain languages have several words for describing the fact of being single.

The French language is particularly polysemous in this regard (see Table 1). The term *célibat*, from latin *caelibatus*, refers to three distinct notions in contemporary France. First, it is a marital status and, as such, stands in opposition to marriage, divorce, and widowhood. A person who is *célibataire* is, in legal terms, an individual who has never been married, in opposition to those who are (*marié* [married] or *pacsé* [as in *Pacte civil de solidarité* (PACS), *i.e.* in a civil union]) or have been (*divorcé* [divorced] and *veuf/veuve* [widow]).

Second, *célibat* refers nowadays also to a relationship status. Until the 1960s, the legal marital status often overlapped with *de facto* marital status in France, but from the 1970s onward, this was less the case with the spread of non-marital cohabitation (Prioux, 2003). Since then, the term *célibat* has progressively and increasingly been detached from its legal definition and refers today, in ordinary language, to anyone who is not in a relationship: whether never married, or no longer so, individuals who are not in a couple often present themselves as *célibataires* (Singly (de), 1991).

Third, the word *célibat* can also designate sexual abstinence. In this sense, it refers today primarily to the religious prohibition of sexual activity among priests, monks and nuns, and more broadly to a religious prohibition of romantic involvement, referred to as *célibat ecclésiastique*. One same term is thus used in French to describe three different phenomena that, although once confounded (not being married, not being in a relationship, and not being sexually active), are today socially distinct.

The English language distinguishes on the contrary between the three meanings that are confounded in French. However, marital status as used in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain, has no noun, and no specific adjective, for the situation prior to marriage. Contrarily to French, but much in a similar way to other European languages (such as Dutch and Swedish), the definition is negative: “never married” individuals are distinguished from those who are “married,” as well as those who are “divorced” or “widowed.” At the same time, the term “singlehood” has become a specific term, in ordinary language just as in scientific contexts, to define the fact of not being in a relationship. It has been in use in the United States at least since the 1970s and has outplayed competing terms such as “singleness” or “uncoupled” (Stein, 1975, 1981). Lastly, “celibacy” refers mainly to sexual abstinence. Originating from the same latin word as French *célibat*, it can linguistically (and historically) encompass not having been married, but is today primarily used to refer to someone who is refraining from sexual activity in obedience to religious belief and vows (Cambridge Dictionary, 1994).

Table 1. Linguistic polysemy in Romance and Germanic languages

Languages	Marital status (legal category)	Relationship status (ordinary language for “not in a relationship”)	Sexual abstinence (especially religious)
French			
Status	Célibat	Célibat	Célibat
Person	Célibataire	Célibataire	***
Spanish			
Status	Soltería	Soltería	Celibato
Person	Soltero/a	Soltero/a, Single	Célibe
Italian			
Status	***	***	Celibato
Person	Celibe (m) / Nubile (w)	Scapolo (m) / Zitella (w), Single	***
English			
Status	***	Singlehood	Celibacy
Person	Never married	Single	Celibate
German			
Status	***	Singledasein	Zölibat
Person	Ledig	Alleinstehend, Single	Zölibatäre
Dutch			
Status	***	Alleenstaande	Celibaat
Person	Ongehuwd	Alleenstaand, Single	Celibatair
Swedish			
Status	***	Singelliv	Celibat
Person	Ogift	Ensamstående, Singel	***

Other languages show yet other distinctions and overlaps. An overview of Romance and Germanic languages reveals the diversity of terms at use. Although Italian and Spanish have the same Latin origins as French, the words referring to marital status and relationship status differ; only the term used for religious sexual abstinence similarly draw on Latin *caelibatus*. In many Germanic languages, there is no evident noun for *singlehood* and, interestingly, it is often the English words that have been imported and inspired local words for describing this situation, as in *singledasein* in German. Similarly, the adjectives historically used to describe someone who is not in a relationship have met competition from English. In German, Dutch, and Swedish, this

situation is traditionally described as “standing alone” (*alleinstehend* in German, *alleenstaanden* in Dutch and *ensamstående* in Swedish), but this wording has increasingly been abandoned for locally linguistic versions of “single,” although more so in ordinary language than in scientific contexts. This is also the case in Spanish and in Italian where the English term “single” is today largely at use. These changes in words are not only linguistic but reflect evolutions in intimate life – evolutions that the social scientific measures have slowly but surely adopted.

Statistical Measures

Five measures of singlehood coexist in the social scientific literature. Until recently, marital status has largely been used in Europe and North America to approach relationship status. This legal definition breaks down into two statistical measures. First, singles are defined as individuals who have not (yet) entered marriage, and correspond to the category “never married.” Second, singles are defined as individuals who are unmarried and include the marital statuses “never married,” “divorced,” and “widowed.” In contexts where marriage rates are high, these two measures give a relatively accurate image of actual family forms (Esteve et al., 2020), but they inevitably lack precision, especially with regard to specific populations. In particular, same-sex relationships go under the radar in contexts where same-sex marriage is not legal (Chamie & Mirkin, 2011). But marital status is also an imperfect measure of heterosexual singlehood, and this holds true for former historical periods as well.

Indeed, non-marital relationships are not new. In Europe, cohabitation existed as family form well before the Second Demographic Transition (Kok & Leinarte, 2015; Lesthaeghe & Van de Kaa, 1986) and, prior to this period, a significant proportion of “never married” individuals where, in fact, not “single.” A study carried out by Brée shows that in Paris, in the inter-war

period, 15% of never-married women and 20% of never-married men were in fact not single but cohabiting, levels being much higher in working class areas (Brée, in press). In the 19th century and the first part of the 20th century, cohabitation was indeed quite common in cities in France, especially among the lower social classes. For example, in the working-class Parisian neighbourhood of Belleville, 14% of marriages formalized a pre-existing union in 1872, 17% in 1910 (Jacquemet, 1984, p. 342).

On the contrary, in the United States, cohabitation appears to have been relatively uncommon up until the 1970s (Glick & Spanier, 1980; Spanier, 1983). In 1979, only 3% of all “couple households” involved unmarried cohabiting partners (Smock, 2000). In certain states, it was almost impossible to cohabit prior to the 1970s as laws banned “lewd and lascivious cohabitation” (Pleck, 2012, p. 112). These 19th century laws were gradually abolished, as cohabiting unions rapidly grew in numbers (Smock & Manning, 2010).

Cohabitation went statistically unnoticed when couple life was solely measured in terms of marital life, and therefore singlehood, understood as a relationship status, was overestimated. The profound changes in family life that occurred in the Western world in the second half of the 20th century (Sobotka & Berghammer, 2021) made marital status obsolete. The sharp decrease in marriage, and the increase in cohabiting unions in all strata of society, has progressively changed the statistical approach to relationship status, and consequently, to who is counted as single or not. The legal definition has given way to a material one: singlehood is hence rarely defined as *not being married* but rather as *not living with someone under the same roof*.

In 1990, the United States census included for the first time “unmarried partner” as a possible relationship to the “householder,” and so made it possible to distinguish between married couples, cohabiting partners and, indirectly, single individuals (Casper & Cohen, 2000).

In social surveys, the statistical turn from marital status to cohabitation was more progressive and hesitant. For instance, The National Survey on Family Growth first distinguished between marriage and “informal marriage” in 1982 before asking women about unmarried cohabitation with a “partner or boyfriend” in 1988, as opposed to being “never married.” The General Social Survey relied mainly on marital status from 1972, when the survey was launched, until 2012. Over the years however, the survey has occasionally asked respondents about their relationship status (1986, 2000) or their “romantic involvements” (1996, 1998). Yet, it was not until 2012 that a question on relationship status was systematically included in the survey, distinguishing between being married, living together with a partner or having a non-cohabiting “steady partner.”

In the French census, only legal marital status was collected until 2004, despite the significant decline in marriage from the 1970s onwards. Only with the redesign of the census at this date was a question introduced with regard to cohabiting relationships (Buisson, 2017). Social surveys, on the other hand, were quicker to adopt new definitions. Beginning in 1984, the French National Housing Survey distinguished between those living with or without a partner, and the Survey on Family Situations, carried out the same year, asked respondents about their “steady” non cohabiting relationships.

Another material approach to singlehood that relies on cohabitation is the measure of one-person households (Esteve et al., 2020; Klinenberg, 2012; Sandström & Karlsson, 2019). This definition captures “single living” rather than “single individuals” and has the advantage of being easy at hand. In most Western countries, numerous administrative data contain information on dwellings and the number of individuals within each household, such as for example census data, fiscal data, and national register data. The general trend is a significant rise in one-person

households over the last decades, with Europe and United States having the highest rates in the world (Cohen, 2021). Single living is however a poor indicator of relationship status. It measures a living arrangement and distinguishes individuals who live alone from not only those who live with a partner but also from unpartnered individuals who live with their children, parents, other relatives or friends. Moreover, the measure is closely associated with national housing policies and markets. In countries where housing is easily accessible due to subsidies and extensive public housing (such as the Scandinavian countries), the rate of single living is generally high. The measures thus contain several confounding variables, making for an imprecise measure of relationship status.

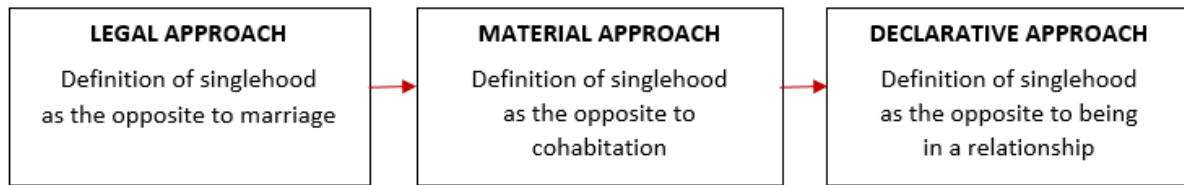
Since approximately fifteen years ago, a fifth indicator of singlehood has existed and is found primarily in social surveys. Just as the rise in cohabitation made marital status obsolete as an indicator of relationship status, the growing visibility of couples “living apart together” (LAT) has led social scientists to rethink their measures (Rault et al., 2019). In certain surveys, the distinction between couple life and single life is now defined, not through a legal or material approach, but a declarative one: individuals are considered to be (or not) in a relationship when they declare to be so (or not), independently of their marital situation or living arrangements. This approach was adopted in 2009 in the US survey *How Couples Meet and Stay Together* (HCMST), in which respondents were asked whether they had “a boyfriend, a girlfriend, a sexual partner or a romantic partner?” (Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012). The latest French Study on *Conjugal and Individual Trajectories* (EPIC), conducted in 2013-2014, adopted a similar approach, asking individuals about their “important romantic relationships” (Rault et al., 2019).

This declarative measure of relationship status is still rare in surveys, and social scientists seem reluctant to rely solely on people’s own interpretation of what it means to be “in a couple”

or “single.” There is a well-founded concern that individual definitions vary widely (and differ according to age, gender, social class etc.) and that the declarative measure is therefore heterogeneous and instable (Régnier-Loilier, in press). Because LAT relationships are particularly common among young people, there is a specific concern that “some of these young relationships consist of temporary boy or girl friends or partnerships where co-residential living is not a consideration” (Haskey, 2005, p. 43). In this view, young couples are not “real” couples according to the social scientific definition, which relies on legal or material markers, and consequently young people in LAT relationships should be counted as “singles” although they do not define themselves as such. This discrepancy between scientific definitions and social meaning raises important questions. Just as much as the heterogeneity of the declarative measure is an important concern, so is also the use of academic definitions that do not match how people refer to themselves. In the event of a continuous rise in LAT relationship, social scientists will most probably have to reconsider their measures again as cohabitation might no longer be a dividing line between couple life and single life (Régnier-Loilier et al., 2009).

The statistical measures of singlehood have changed over time. What has not changed, however, is the negative and deductive approach at use (see Figure 1). Indeed, singlehood is rarely approached explicitly: surveys generally do not ask respondents if they are single, but rather if they are married, if they are living with someone as a couple, or if they have a romantic partner. Only by taking interest in the individuals who answer no to these questions can social scientists measure and study singlehood, albeit indirectly. In other words, singles are the residual after couples have been accounted for.

Figure 1. Change in the statistical approach to singlehood



Who and How Many are Single?

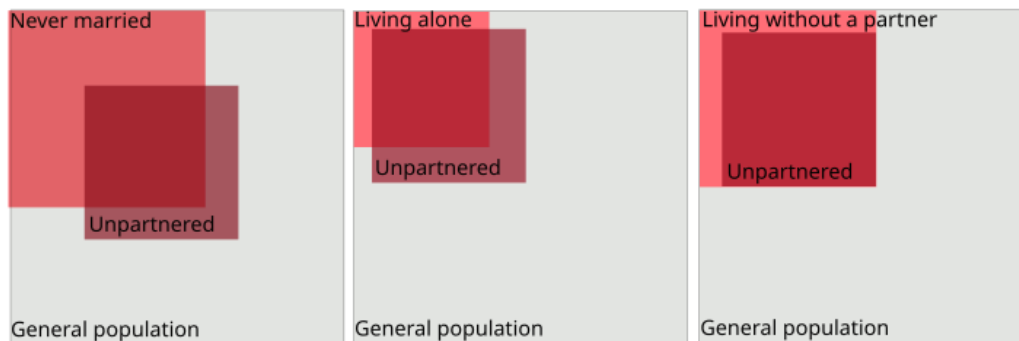
The definition of singlehood is not merely a methodological issue but has profound implications for how we describe and theorize historical change. Who is single, and on what empirical ground can we say that singlehood is on the rise? The answers to these questions depend on the definitions used as well as the point of reference: what is the comparison group? This section examines the implications of the different measurement approaches to singlehood and looks at the driving forces behind the increase in the share of singles.

The Share and Evolution of Singles

Different measures of singlehood are more or less inclusive and correspond to different subgroups of the general population. This is evident from social surveys that include several indicators and allow for comparison. Using the French EPIC survey from 2013-2014, Bergström and Vivier (2020) examined how different measures of singlehood overlap in France. The authors adopted a declarative definition of singlehood, corresponding to individuals who do not consider themselves to be in a committed relationship (referred to as “unpartnered”), and used this measure as a reference point for comparison with three other measures: singlehood as “never married,” as “living alone,” and as “not living with a partner” (see Figure 2). The comparison shows that the group of “never married” individuals only loosely overlaps with that of “unpartnered” individuals and, compared to the latter, the marital status largely overestimates the

share of singles in the general population as a significant proportion of couples in contemporary France live together without being married. Single living, on the other hand, underestimates singlehood according to the authors' definition, as many individuals who consider themselves unpartnered live with other people, such as their parents, their children or friends. To “not live with a partner” and to declare oneself “unpartnered” are the two measures that overlap the most, but the material definition relying on cohabitation overestimates singlehood (as defined by the authors) as individuals who are in couples “living apart together” are counted as singles. The comparison shows clearly that the different measures are not merely competing ways of approaching the same social phenomenon, but actually lead to studying different parts of the population.

Figure 2. Statistical overlapping between different measures of singlehood in France (%)



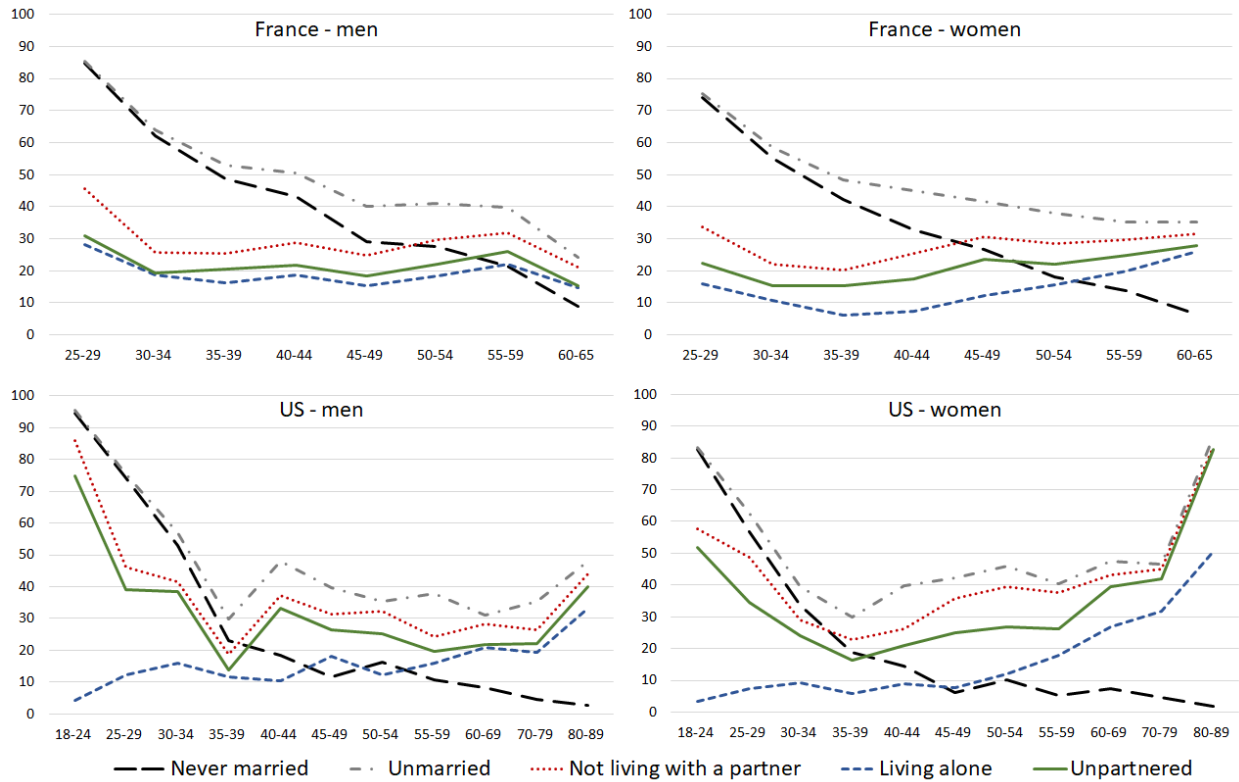
Note. The areas are proportional to the share of never married individuals (35%), people living alone (16%), people living without a partner (28%), and people reporting not having a romantic partner (21%) among the general population in France aged 26-65 years (100%). The intersecting areas show the overlap between these categories.

Sources: French EPIC survey 2013-2014, Bergström & Vivier, 2020.

This is even clearer when looking at the “stock” of singles by gender and age group according to different measures. The EPIC survey in France (2013-2014) and the GSS survey in the United States (2018) allow for comparisons of all five measures of singlehood (see figure 3).

They show that different definitions correspond to very different statistical results. Because the survey designs and dates are different, it is not possible to compare national contexts in detail, but the intra-country comparison reveals diverging measures for each gender and age group. For instance in France, among 25-29 year olds, as many as 85% of men and 75% of women are unmarried, but only respectively 46% and 34% of them do not live with a partner, and merely 31% of men and 22% of women declare to be unpartnered. A general trend in both countries is that the matrimonial definition of singlehood as “never married” leads to continuous decreasing rates of singlehood with age, whereas the other indicators follow trends that are more diverse. In both the United States and France, results for women take a U-shape whereas for men the indicators first drop and then stay around the same levels. This suggests that for men, exiting young adulthood often means exiting singlehood, whereas many women progressively return to being single later in life. In other words, singlehood is more age-dependent for women than for men.

Figure 3. Share of singles by gender and age group according to different measures in France and the US (%)



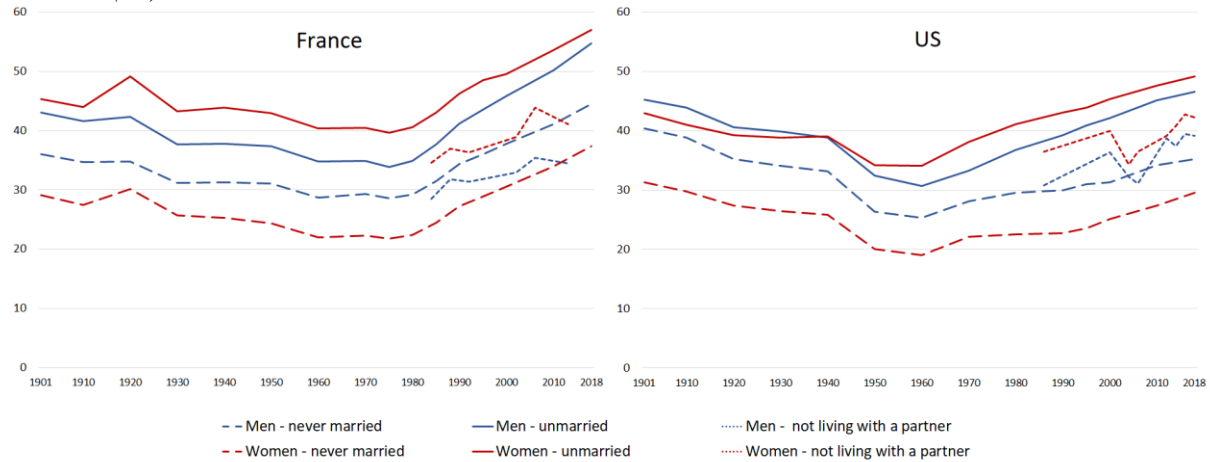
Note. Sources: French EPIC survey 2013-2014; US GSS survey 2018.

What can these different measures say about change over time? The idea that singlehood is on the rise is strong within the social scientific literature, but few studies present empirical results on historical patterns (Bailey et al., 2014; Engelen & Kok, 2003; Henry & Houdaille, 1978). This is probably due in part to a lack of data. The possibilities for historical comparison are unequal for different measures. Marriage records are the most easily available data and thus allow for the longest running historical series. As shown in the previous section, measures based on cohabitation are more recent, and as for declarative definitions, sources are too scarce to allow for any long-term comparison.

Censuses from the United States and France show that, when singlehood is measured by marital status, the long-running historical trend takes a U-shape (see Figure 4). This holds true both for a definition of singlehood as “never married” and as “unmarried” (including individuals who are “never married,” “divorced,” and “widowed”). This U-shape means that the historical tendency depends on the reference point. When comparing the 21st century with the beginning of the 20th century, there is no unambiguous rise in singlehood, especially in the United States, as rates have evolved significantly over time, with the mid-20th century being an all-time low in the share of singles. On the other hand, both measures of marital singlehood show a sharp increase since the mid-20th century, especially in France, that corresponds to the well-known decrease in marriage rate over the period, which concerns first marriages and, even more so, remarriages (Lesthaeghe, 2014).

This recent rise in singlehood is corroborated when adopting a material definition based on cohabitation with a partner. Historical analysis is possible for both genders from 1984 to 2013 in France, and from 1986 to 2018 in the United States. Data from the two countries show that the rate of singlehood is lower when it is defined in reference to cohabitation instead of a definition of singles as “unmarried” individuals. Moreover, the share of non-cohabiting singles is considerable higher than the share of “never married” singles for women, but not for men.

Figure 4. Evolution of singlehood by gender according to different measures in the US and France (%)



Note. Sources: French National Housing Survey on individuals (1984-2013, individuals aged 18 or more) and French decennial census (1901-2018, individuals aged 15 or more) (Insee, 2022); US GSS Survey (1986-2018, individuals aged 18 or more) and US decennial census (1901-2018, individuals aged 15 or more) (US Census Bureau, 2003; 2022).

The Driving Forces

Although at various rates depending on the definition, the share of singles in the general population has thus risen over the past decades. What are the driving forces behind this general trend? Overall, four demographic factors have an impact on the rate of singlehood in a given population and its evolution over time: the rate of permanent singlehood, the age at first union, the share of widows, and the rate of separation and divorce. Tendencies for these four factors are relatively similar in the United States and France, and the literature on both countries gives congruent indications on what is swelling the ranks of the single population.

First, the single population is partly made up by individuals who stay single their whole life. The most common definition of permanent singlehood is the proportion of individuals who are not yet married, or not yet in a co-residential relationship, by the age of 40 or 50, and who are

considered to have low statistical chances of experiencing marriage or cohabitation beyond this age (Bellani et al., 2017; Esteve et al., 2020). An increasing rate of individuals who never engage in marital or cohabiting relationships would inevitably contribute to a rise in singles. This is not the case however. In both countries, this factor has a weak impact on the evolution of singlehood. In France as in other European countries (Bellani et al., 2017), permanent singlehood is a rare demographic phenomenon that has been incredibly stable over the past centuries (Henry & Houdaille, 1978). The share of individuals who marry before age 40 was constant until the mid-20th century, before marriage rates started to drop, and since then the rate of individuals who cohabit by age 40 has remained relatively stable, indicating that permanent singlehood is rare and not rising (Bouchet-Valat & Dutreuilh, 2015; INSEE, 2021; Prioux, 2003). In the United States, the proportion of ever-married individuals by age 40 was equivalent in 1870 and 1970, but dropped in the middle of the century, which gives the trend an inversed U-shape (Bailey et al., 2014). However, the share of individuals who cohabit with a partner at some point (whether married or not) is high in the US and has not changed significantly for cohorts born between 1940 and 1970, meaning that long-lasting singlehood also has a marginal and rather stable impact on the overall rate of singles (Bailey et al., 2014).

Second, the rate of singlehood at a given time, and the evolution of the share of singles in the general population, depend on age at first couple formation. In the literature, this factor is considered important. Much like the other steps in the transition to adulthood (leaving the parental home, finishing school, getting a first job and having a first child), forming a first couple is said to be taking place at older ages today compared to former generations, and singlehood is thus said to have been extended during youth (Arnett, 2004; Douglass, 2007; Heath & Cleaver, 2003). Depending on the reference point however, this picture is more or less accurate. In the US

in particular, the historical perspective used significantly alters the perspective. If one compares generations born in the 1940s with those born in the 1970s, age at first marriage has indeed risen and, in this sense, recent generations of young people stay single longer than former ones did. However, if one takes a step backward and sets the starting point at the cohort born in the 1870s, the rise is much less significant. Moreover, the evolution depends on the definition. In an article published in 2014, Manning and colleagues compared change in median age at first marriage with that of first cohabitation over a recent period, and showed that trends differ considerably (Manning et al., 2014). Whereas age at first marriage has indeed increased between the 1980s and 2010, age at first cohabitation is stable over the same period, indicating that young adult singlehood has not increased over time (Manning et al., 2014). Research on France show similar results. When singlehood is defined in opposition to marriage, we see a clear extension of single life during youth over the last decades, but when defined in opposition to cohabitation, the trend is much more nuanced (Bergström & Moulin, 2022). In this view, no more in France than in the United States is there an obvious rise in singlehood during youth.

Third, widowhood has historically been an important factor of singlehood. This is especially true for women who benefit from greater life expectancy. For instance, in Paris in the inter-war period, widows made up for the largest share of single women at all ages (Brée, in press). Widowhood has however decreased over time. In France, the share of widows in the general population dropped from 12% in 1901 to 5% in 2019 (from 15 % to 10% for women and 6% to 2% for men, see Insee, 2021). The explanation lies in the rise of male life expectancy. Age at widowhood has risen and so the share of individuals living as single due to the loss of their spouse is continuously declining both in France (Delbès & Gaymu, 2003) and the United States (Carlson & Schweizer, 2020).

Fourth and lastly, the rate and evolution of singlehood depends on separation and divorce, a factor that is particularly important during mid-life. Couple dissolution has dramatically increased in the Western World during the 20th and 21st century. In the United States, among individuals aged 20-39, the share of separated and divorced individuals increased more than 500% between 1880 and 1990 (Ruggles, 1997). In France, the share of divorced women was almost 800% higher in 1990 compared to 1890, and more than 900% higher in 2016 (from 10.8 divorces for 10,000 married women in 1890, to 84.0 in 1990, and more than 100 today, cf. (Brée, 2022)). In contemporary France, separated and divorced individuals constitute the largest proportion of singles between 25 and 65 years old (Bergström et al., 2019). To return to the experience of singlehood, after having known couple life, has become common.

The comparison of the historical evolutions of all four factors indicates that the recent rise in singlehood is mainly located among the separated. Whereas life-long singlehood is statistically rare, there is no evident postponement of couple formation among the young and widowhood is decreasing, there is an important increase in separation and divorce, leading more individuals to become single again during their life course. However, singlehood due to separation is rarely long-term singlehood. Recent research in France showed that among individuals aged 26 to 65 who had separated, half had reformed a new couple within two years of the break-up (INSEE, 2015). In other words, separated singles are rarely long-lasting singles.

What is New?

The evolution in statistical trends indicate that singlehood has changed over time, but tell us nothing about the meaning of this change. How is modern singlehood different from that of former historical periods? What is new about being single today? Few authors have set out to document how representations of singlehood have changed over the centuries (Bologne, 2004),

but many studies take interest in the specificities of the contemporary era. Conclusions differ in this regard. Although a portion of the social scientific literature insists on historical stability and stresses the pervading strength of the couple norm, another stream of research draws attention to historical transformations and presents singlehood as a new lifestyle.

The Couple Norm

The words traditionally used for naming older unmarried individuals reveal the opprobrium singles were subjected to, at least until mid-20th century. In France, never married women were called *vieilles filles* and their male counterparts *vieux garçons*. The terms, which literally translate as “old girls” and “old boys,” underscore the social inferiority of singles who were not considered to be true adult women and men. In the United States, the pejorative names “spinster” or “old maid” have no direct translation for men, indicating that the social stigma is also gendered, as “bachelor” has no evident negative connotation.

In France, the opprobrium became acute at the end of 19th century when it became clear that the number of births were declining. With the publication of the 1891 census, demographers realized that the number of deaths had been exceeding that of births since the last census of 1886. The insight spurred a fear of depopulation, and several measures were suggested in order to fight against the decline in births, such as a rise in taxes for single individuals (Thébaud, 1985).

Unmarried women and men were frowned upon because they did not procreate (or not properly so in case of births out of wedlock) and were presented as egotistic since they did not contribute to the effort of national growth. Along the same line, nuns were criticized by certain late 19th century feminists, in the journal *La Fronde*, who considered them “useless” and “selfish” since they took the “easy” decision not to have children and so avoided the “duties, responsibilities, fatigue and torments of motherhood” (Vadepied, 2021, p. 55).

How do we consider singles today? Most certainly, representations differ between different forms of singlehood and depictions depend on gender, age, class, and race, as well as individuals' relational trajectory. However, many social scientific scholars generally agree that the representations of singlehood have changed since the 19th century, due all at once to the changing role of family and matrimony, and to new norms and values. Others guard against the idea that singlehood has become normalized and socially accepted, and draw attention to the different ways in which single individuals are still discriminated against. In the book, *The Tenacity of the Couple-Norm*, a group of European sociologists and researchers in gender studies argue that conjugality is still the basis of citizenship in European societies, highlighting the way family policies and law reproduce inequalities between individuals living within or outside of normative couple relationships (Roseneil et al., 2020) In line with this thesis, several authors have stressed that singles have more harsh living conditions than married individuals, especially in terms of their economic situation. In both France and in the United States, single individuals often pay a higher income tax than married couples (Alm et al., 2002; Carbonnier, 2021), and a recent study observed a different treatment between the two groups by the U.S Social Security system (Groneck & Wallenius, 2021). Inequality has also been observed within private enterprises in which being married allows men to earn more than their single peers by simple reputation (Antonovics & Town, 2004). These financial difficulties lead some singles to stay, or return to, living with their parents, or to continue living with their partner although separated (Living Together Apart – LTA, cf. (Martin et al., 2011).

According to DePaulo (2006), these economic inequalities are coupled with social discrimination and stigmatization of singles, which is the core of what she calls “singlism.” The main thesis is that couple life is socially more rewarding than single life, and that individuals

with a partner are considered all at once more valuable, worthy, important, happier and mature than singles (B. DePaulo, 2006; B. M. DePaulo & Morris, 2005). A study on singlehood in France reached a similar, although less clear-cut, conclusion. Although living outside of marriage or couple relationships is no longer frowned upon, the social status associated with singlehood is still inferior to that associated with couple life in France, and single individuals are commonly pressured to (re)partner (Bergström et al., 2019). Even authors whose explicit aim is to challenge a too miserable image of singlehood reach a similar conclusion. In a recent book, Elyakim Kislev (Kislev, 2019, pp. 3–4) start by stressing the “negative societal perceptions of singles” that pervade society and the cultural forces that “push people into marriage.” The focus of the analysis however quickly switched in favor of the general aim of the study, which was to investigate “the cases in which singles accept, even celebrate, their marital status” (p. 3). According to the author as well as others, many individuals today embrace singlehood as a lifestyle.

The Single Lifestyle

The title of Kislev’s book *Happy Singles. The Rising Acceptance and Celebration of Solo Living*, published in 2019, resonates with that of Eric Klinenberg, *Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone*, from 2012 (Kislev, 2019; Klinenberg, 2012). According to the two authors, an increasing number of individuals in Western societies choose either to remain or to go “solo” – an idea that has also caught up with the press (Gollayan, 2018; John, 2021; Wong, 2015). Although they do not define “solo” the same way – Klinenberg studied people living alone whereas Kislev took interest in unmarried individuals as well as those who “do not live with a partner” – they both approached it as a new lifestyle. But to what extent is singlehood a lifestyle in its own right, and increasingly so?

Although the term is vague, “lifestyle” generally refers to a set of coherent socioeconomic living conditions and habits. The Cambridge Dictionary (1994) defines it as the way individuals live, as in what they do for a living, where they live, and the nature of their leisure activities. This definition brings into question the specificity of the contemporary era. Drawing on historical research, we argue that singlehood is less of a “lifestyle” today than it was some hundred years ago. Up until the beginning of the 20th century, being single was a destiny or choice linked to certain occupations and associated with specific living conditions. Three elements point in this direction.

First, “professionally induced singlehood” was common up to the beginning of the 20th century, especially among women. For instance, women teachers were not authorized to marry in many countries, or they would lose their jobs. This was the case in the United States until the Second World War (Huret, 2019) and in Germany between 1880 and 1951 (Jud-Krepper, 2019). For a long time, the word *Fraulein*, for “miss” in German, was even synonymous with “teacher.” In France, unmarried female teachers, but also nurses, were preferred in line with ideals (originally religious) of vocation and sacrifice. Singlehood was a guarantee of good morals (Bodinier, 2018). Maids were also required to remain single (hence the term “old maid” for single woman in the United States) and those who married were asked to leave the occupation, whereas those who continued their work remained single their whole life (Fauve-Chamoux, 2009). In southern Western Europe, domesticity was often a lifelong occupation (Fauve-Chamoux, 2009), but in Northern Europe it was only a phase in life, sometimes during late childhood and more commonly during adolescence and the premarital years (Wall, 1987). Although not necessarily voluntary, being single can thus be considered to have been a lifestyle for a large number of women.

Second, “economically induced singlehood” characterized many agricultural societies in Europe up until the 20th century. As John Hajnal showed in his well-known work on European marriage patterns, the historical trend in northwest Europe was late marriage and high levels of singlehood (Hajnal, 1965). In some European countrysides, especially in mountainous regions, singlehood was a consequence of the rules of inheritance (Fauve-Chamoux, 1995). These societies were characterized by a stem family system, based on a fundamental concern to ensure both the continuity and the integrity of the family farm which in turn was the source of wealth and the symbol of family honour. This system implied renouncing an equal division of the estate between heirs, in favour of the oldest child, a man in the vast majority of cases, but sometimes a woman, as in the Basque Country (Fauve-Chamoux, 1988, 1995). The younger siblings were left without inheritances and many did not marry. Men turned to occupations within the military or the church, whereas others, both women and men, were employed in domestic service. The “unmarriageable men” portrayed by Pierre Bourdieu in *The Bachelors’ Ball* (Bourdieu, 2009) are the remnants of this economically induced singlehood that, although rarely chosen, was in many ways a traditional European agricultural “lifestyle.”

Third, “religiously induced singlehood” is common within many religions, such as the Catholic church, as priests, monks, and nuns are not allowed to marry or to be romantically involved. Although this is still the case today within Catholicism, the share of individuals who follow a vocational pathway has dramatically declined since the beginning of the 20th century. In France, there were 13,331 diocesan priests in 2012 compared to 40,994 in 1965 (Tricou, 2021, p. 130), and in the 1960s the number of priests was already exceptionally low compared to the beginning of the 20th century and was considered as a sign of a general “vocational crisis” (Pelletier, 2005, p. 48). The decrease is also visible in the United States with regard to nuns for

example: the total number of religious sisters dropped from approximately 180,000 in the mid-1960s to less than 50,000 in 2014 (Pew Research Center, 2014). The clerical vocation, and singlehood as destiny, thus concerned a significant minority of individuals in former historical periods, but much less so today.

Nowadays, exceptionally few occupations require one to stay single, today's legal and economic system does not lead to structural singlehood in the same way as it did in the 19th century, and vocational singlehood has significantly dropped and made clerical celibacy a topic of debate in many countries. In other words, whereas in the 19th century singlehood was indeed a "lifestyle," understood as a choice or destiny associated with one's professional status or specific role within the family or society, this is no longer the case in the contemporary Western World.

Switching from Singles to Singlehood

How does this review of the definitions, the evolution and the changing meaning of singlehood contribute to theorizing contemporary singlehood? The three questions discussed in this paper, and the diverse answers provided by the current literature, first of all underline the necessity for researchers to specify their analytical strategy. The absence of a common understanding of singlehood within the social sciences is not a problem in itself. What is problematic is rather that authors seldom justify their choice of definition, recognize its limitations, acknowledge the existence of competing approaches, or discuss the implications for both the measure and the meaning of singlehood. This invitation for precision does not ignore that one's analytical strategy is often limited by empirical possibilities. Within quantitative research especially, researchers have to settle for the data and measures that are available, and because singlehood is a neglected topic in social surveys, choices are often limited. Yet these

constraints are just another reason for researchers to pay particular attention to the contours of their analytical strategy and the implications of their approach.

Answers to the three questions also provide an invitation to step away from an approach of singles as a *population*. In a comment to DePaulos thesis of “singelism,” US scholars Margaret S. Clark and Steven M. Graham rightly question whether “categorizing people as singles or non-singles [is] useful for a relationship researcher?” and come to the conclusion that “single” is “too broad a term or category to be scientifically useful” (Clark & Graham, 2005, p. 135). Indeed, the single population is heterogeneous regardless of the definition used. A working-class single mom does not necessarily have much in common with a male single student, or an unpartnered elderly widow, and so on. As shown in the two previous sections, singlehood is not restricted to a certain demographic nor is it associated to a coherent lifestyle. In other words, singles do not constitute a group and, in fact, this is less and less the case. To approach them as such inevitably leads to two different pitfalls. Researcher either will downplay the heterogeneity of the category or, if seeking to differentiate between different subgroups, will fall back on fundamental sociodemographic determinants such as age, gender, race, and class, which are already well known.

This is not to doom research on singles. On the contrary, we believe that singlehood is both an important and heuristic topic of research that requires more academic attention. But contemporary singlehood is better understood from a life course perspective than with a population approach. Being single is, more than ever, a *period of life* rather than belonging to a *group*. People are single when they are young before the vast majority of them enters couple life, and many of them will become single again – and some even again and again – after a break-up and/or after widowhood. Separation and divorce constitute the main factors behind the recent rise

in the number of singles, meaning that singlehood is more than ever a recurrent experience. What is new in the contemporary era is precisely that individuals circulate much more between phases of couple life and single life over the life course. Our analytical tools need to take these shifting phases into account.

The life course perspective is, of course, not new in itself. But it is far less developed in studies on singlehood compared to research on couple relationships. To reinforce these perspectives means developing certain research topics: for instance, the duration of single periods (temporality); how entering or exiting single life changes economic, material and social life (transitions and adaptations); or how the experience of singlehood affects subsequent trajectories (socialization and bifurcation). For researchers interested in singlehood, this implies abandoning the conventional approach focusing on “stocks” for a dynamic perspective of “flows.” For specialists in life course analysis, it means investigating singlehood as a life period in its own right rather than as holes in the relational trajectory.

This invitation is not merely methodological. To adopt a life course perspective does not require a turn to longitudinal and biographic methods, such as sequence analysis or survival analysis (Elzinga & Liefbroer, 2007). The invitation is above all analytical. Regardless of data sources and methods (qualitative, quantitative, or historical), we need to acknowledge the instability of the single category. An individual who is not partnered might be so tomorrow, just as a person in a couple may turn single overnight. Singlehood is an experience, not an identity or a community.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to review existing literature in order to answer three questions that we believe to be prerequisites for theorizing singlehood. The first relates to the definition: who

counts as single? The multiple ways of answering this question is certainly the biggest challenge to a theory of singlehood. The contours of this phenomenon are particularly unstable, as we can see both in the great diversity of terms used in ordinary language, and the multiple scientific definitions. Focusing on the way surveys delimit the single population, we showed that five statistical definitions co-exist: singlehood as “never married,” “unmarried,” “not living with a partner,” “living alone,” or “not being in a committed relationship.” The last and most recent approach relies on a declarative definition and, as such, reflects what individuals themselves mean when they talk about singlehood, which makes it heuristic for social scientific research. It however embraces a wide range of situations and so challenges the homogeneity of the category.

The answers to the second question are contingent on the first ones. Who and how many are single depends on the definition. Comparisons of the measures used in the social sciences show that they poorly overlap and encompass different parts of the population. The historical evolution, in addition to being measure-sensitive, depends also on the period of reference. Whereas social scientists commonly compare the current period with the mid-20th century, showing an increase in the number of singles, longer historical series reveal more variation and challenge the idea of a unitary rise in singlehood and the specificity of the contemporary era. Among the four factors that come into play in the changing rates of singlehood, separation and divorce are today the most prominent. The increase in singlehood over the past decades is mainly due to increasing break-ups. The “new singles” in the 21st century, those who are swelling the ranks of the single population, are not young people putting off couple life for good or for later, but rather separated individuals.

Lastly, the question of the specificity of the contemporary era shows a division in the social scientific literature between those who see continuity and those who stress change.

Researchers investigating the couple norm belong to the former. Although undoubtedly the image of singles has improved over time, the norm of matrimony and couplehood is still strong. The contrary claim that singlehood has become a new and accepted lifestyle is a compelling critique of the often-miserable depiction of singles but, in our view, it fails to convince scientifically. From a historical perspective, singlehood was more of a lifestyle a hundred years ago than it is today.

Drawing the conclusions from this literature review, organized from the perspective of three different but related questions, we invite social scientists to move from a population approach to a biographic approach, arguing that, for understanding the contemporary era, singles are less relevant than singlehood.

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