

Q&A WITH BELLA DEPAULO, PH.D.

What was the inspiration for your book?

I was inspired by a lifetime of personal experiences as a single person. What was striking about my experiences is that they did not fit with the prevailing cultural portrayal of singlehood. Stereotypically, as a single person, I should have been miserable, lonely, selfish, immature, and desperate to find my way to coupledness. I wasn't. But I was treated as if I fit all of those descriptions.

How and why did you start working on this book?

The first step toward writing this book – and beyond that, embracing consciousness-raising about singles as the defining passion of my life – was to find out whether my own experiences as a single person were shared. Very tentatively at first, I began to ask other singles whether (for example) they believed they were excluded from social events because they were not coupled or were asked to work at unpopular times by colleagues and bosses who assumed they had nothing better to do. Sometimes I initiated such a conversation at a social event, while talking to one other person. A predictable sequence ensued. The other person had plenty of stories. Then, others at the event heard our conversation and joined us. The discussion continued over the course of the evening. Then, the next day, I often had emails from people describing other experiences they forgot to mention the night before.

Next, I began to study singles, and their place in society and in science, in earnest. I conducted studies, read extensively, and taught a course on the topic. I began to receive invitations to speak about singles. I was also awarded grant money to continue my research. Then I was invited to write the target article for a double-issue of a journal that was dedicated exclusively to the study of singles. Ten sets of scholars from a variety of disciplines wrote comments on my target article, and my co-author and I wrote a response.

By then, I was also recognized by people in the media as someone with expertise on the topic of singles. I was quoted in newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. Major newsweeklies such as *Business Week* ran cover stories on singles in which I was quoted. The year 2004 was a Presidential election year, and singles were the new hot demographic. My op-ed, "Sex and the Single Voter," was published in *The New York Times*.

It was time to write my book.

What kind of experience has writing your book been for you (fun, exciting, agonizing...)?

It has been an absolutely exhilarating experience. I am passionate about the topic. Even though I had lived as a singleton my entire life, the study of singlehood was entirely new to me. I read voraciously, on topics I knew nothing about previously. I constantly examined the claims that were made about singles in the media, and even in scientific journals, and again and again found them misleading or totally inaccurate. I thought about why this was happening, talked to lots of people, and read some more. Before I began writing about singles, I had an area of academic expertise, on deception. I had written

more than one-hundred scholarly papers on the topic. None of that writing was anything like the experiences I have had writing about singles.

I was interested in deception; I'm passionate about singles. When I sat down to write about deception, I already knew what I was going to say; when I sat down to write about singles, I learned something new almost every time. I still do.

The cultural discourse on singlehood is stuck in a rut, and has been for decades. In writing *Singled Out*, I was blasting my way outside of that narrow box, and loving every step of the way.

OK, not every step. There were times when people read what I had written and did not exactly bubble over with enthusiasm. Those were difficult times. But now, even some of the very negative reactions are heartening. For example, when people totally disagree with my point of view, and are angered by my position, I know I have struck a nerve. I do not enjoy their ire – effusive praise is much more fun – but I love it when they are engaged by my arguments and examples. More than just about anything else, I want people to think – no, to **rethink** what they thought they already knew. Even if they cycle back to their original position, it will be a more informed position.

What features distinguish your book from others on the subject?

First, it is not only about single women. More importantly, it is not another telling of the life stories of people who are single. It goes far beyond that. *Singled Out* takes on the cultural myths about singlehood and tears them apart. First, I take on the scientific underpinnings of our beliefs about marriage and singlehood. As a Harvard PhD with more than one-hundred scholarly publications, and expertise in research methodology, I think I do this quite credibly. Second, I measure coupled people by the same standard used to assess people who are single. When the yardstick is not rigged, it is not single people who look miserable, lonely, and self-centered. Third, I draw from high culture and low, from scientific writings and the conversations of everyday life, to show how even the most accomplished single people – especially the most accomplished singles – are called upon to defend their lives in ways that would be unfathomable for comparable married people.

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