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Make Room for Singles in Teaching and Research

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Over the past few decades, the demographics of the United States have changed markedly. In 1970, 28 percent of Americans over 17 were single — divorced, widowed, or never married. More than twice as many households consisted of mom, dad, and the kids than of single adults living on their own. In 2005 more than 40 percent of adults were single, and more households contained just one person than married couples with children. In another striking departure from the past, Americans now spend more years of their adult lives unmarried than married.

It is not just the proportions of married and single people that are changing; so too are the nature and functions of marriage and the family. The nuclear family — which united marriage, economic viability, bearing and rearing children, love, sex, and intimacy — is splitting apart. In July 2007, the Pew Research Center reported that "just 41 percent of Americans now say that children are 'very important' to a successful marriage." And marriage is no longer the gateway to adulthood and having a family. The same Pew report noted, "In the United States today, marriage exerts less influence over how adults organize their lives and how children are born and raised than at any time in the nation's history."

Ways of thinking about single and married people have not kept up with those rapid social changes. Like other groups considered to be outside the mainstream of American society, single people are often the targets of stereotyping and discrimination. As one of us has shown — in *Singled Out: How Singles Are Stereotyped, Stigmatized, and Ignored, and Still Live Happily Ever After* (St. Martin's Press, 2006), by Bella DePaulo — single men are often paid less than married men, even when their accomplishments are comparable; single people are often charged more than married people for health and automobile insurance; renters prefer married couples to single people as tenants; and so forth.

In the academy, much research and teaching is based on the outdated assumption that marriage and the nuclear family dominate adult life. As a result, people who are single, and perspectives not based on conventional marriage, are greatly underrepresented or misrepresented in scholarship and public policy.

Since 1970 significant additions to the curriculum — such as women's studies, ethnic studies, and environmental studies — have revealed missing perspectives and challenged distorted ones on important subjects. Those transformations were driven by social movements. Other curricular innovations, like the addition of a global perspective to many disciplines, emerged from a recognition that our students would be living and working in a changing world. Now we need to change the curriculum to reflect the demographic changes in marriage, singlehood, and family size and composition.

Because marriage is so deeply ensconced in our politics, laws, religion, and customs, fully integrating singles into our research and teaching would require a major transformation. It is not enough merely to append a section on the new group to existing courses. That has been noted by scholars such as Peggy McIntosh, in an influential 1983 working paper from the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, "Interactive Phases of Curriculum Re-Vision: A

Feminist Perspective," and Elizabeth Kamarck Minnich, in *Transforming Knowledge* (2nd edition, Temple University Press, 2005). Instead, we need to change our thinking. The rewards would include fresh perspectives not just on the single life, but also on marriage and the family.

Our own disciplines, and others with which we are familiar, demonstrate how singles should be brought into scholarship and teaching. Marriage and family studies, for example, is a burgeoning, multidisciplinary field that has recently expanded to incorporate the study of nontraditional families. But single people are still likely to appear in its research and courses only if they have an important life experience in common with adults in nuclear families — for example, if they had been married, have children, or are cohabiting.

Scholars in psychology, sociology, and many other disciplines have contributed to the growing field of relationship science — which, in theory, is about all relationships and hence broader than the study of marriage and family. In practice, however, research in that field focuses on romantic and marital attachments, using "relationship" as a shorthand for conjugal ties.

The marriage-centered view of singles assumes that they are alone, and that the growth of one-person households means the nation is at risk of a national epidemic of loneliness. Research from a singles perspective by one of us — *The New Single Woman* (Beacon Press, 2005), by E. Kay Trimberger — and other scholars challenges such assumptions. It shows that singles have strong ties to their extended families, are adept at forming networks of friends, and are more involved in their communities than married people are.

The relationships that are important to single people, like close friendships and ties to members of the extended family, are invisible to or devalued by scholars who consider marriage the norm. Some of them might argue that singles have close friendships because they are compensating for not having a spouse. A singles perspective would generate other hypotheses — for example, that many single people prefer to maintain a diversified relationship portfolio, rather than investing most of their emotional capital in just one person.

That perspective would look at the entirety of adult life, rather than focusing on the years a person might have spent married. Consider, for instance, the many studies on how multiple roles (such as worker, housekeeper, caregiver) relate to the well-being of wives and husbands. A singles perspective would explore how the division of labor within a marriage shapes a spouse's life after separation, divorce, or widowhood. It would look at the implications of multiple roles and skills for all people — not just married ones — throughout their lives.

Even some of the most enduring topics in the social sciences are likely to be refreshed by a singles perspective. For example, research on stereotyping and discrimination has looked at different racial, ethnic, and religious groups, as well as people of different ages and physical conditions or characteristics. But until very recently, it was rare to study singles as a stigmatized group.

The fields of women's studies and ethnic studies pioneered ways to add new subject matter and viewpoints to established disciplines, and since the late 1970s have incorporated the perspectives of race, class, and sexuality. But neither women's studies nor gender studies has adequately investigated the social stigma against singles, especially single women. Only in the past decade or so have a few faculty members in those and related disciplines begun to confront bias against singles. It is important to teach students that the cultural imperatives to find a "soul mate" (ideas transmitted not only by the mass media, but by students' families and friends) represent just one

viewpoint. Students also need to examine their negative stereotypes about older single women, childless single women, and single mothers, and reconsider the values of autonomy and solitude.

In the legal curriculum, courses as diverse as torts, property, evidence, estates and trusts, health-care law, insurance law, family law, and income taxation reflect the law's favoring of married couples over single people. As increasing numbers of Americans become or remain single, laws and policies — and the study of them — need to reflect that social change.

The debate over same-sex marriage has underscored the ways in which the law discriminates against same-sex couples. Husbands and wives have the legal right to share property, to make decisions about each other's medical care, and so forth. Gay couples not permitted to marry do not share those rights. And, as one of us has noted — in Rachel F. Moran's "How Second-Wave Feminism Forgot the Single Woman," in the 2004 Hofstra Law Review — single people are also unable to give such rights to friends, siblings, or others. A singles perspective would ask why adults need to be part of a couple in order to be afforded legal protections.

The changing demographics make rethinking of laws, policies, and scholarship an urgent matter. The shrinking size of the nuclear family means that adults have fewer siblings to turn to for help, and parents as they age cannot rely as heavily on their children. Government aid will become increasingly important, and it will need to be directed to individuals and the personal networks that support them, as well as to families or couples.

Because a singles perspective has been largely absent from the higher-education curriculum, universities have not led the way in analyzing policy and suggesting reform. Incorporating a singles perspective into many fields, including those we have mentioned, would broaden and deepen scholarship while enriching the intellectual life of the classroom.

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