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UCSB Social Psychologist Debunks Myths of Singles and Singlehood

The holidays can be a difficult time for single people. Friends and family, convinced that singles would give up their solo status in a heartbeat if the right person came along, often try to steer them down the road to holy matrimony.

"Facing the 'shoulds' of life -- other people's ideas of how we should be living our lives -- is a constant challenge, but during the holidays they can become even more oppressive," said Bella DePaulo, a social psychologist and visiting professor of psychology at UC Santa Barbara. She has published a new book debunking the myth that married people live longer, happier lives than their single counterparts.

In "Singled Out: How Singles Are Stereotyped, Stigmatized, and Ignored, and Still Live Happily Ever After" (St. Martin's Press, 2006) DePaulo exposes what she considers a widespread bias against unmarried adults, as seen in everything from missed perks to deeper social and financial prejudices.

Inspiration for the book came from her own life experience as a single person, as well as research she conducted through a grant from the Anthony Marchionne Foundation for the Scientific Study of Human Relations and Psychological Processes. The foundation supports research on the demographics of single people, including why people choose not to enter into long-term relationships, and the psychological, behavioral, and physiological consequences of such a choice.

"There's a whole cottage industry on marriage research," DePaulo said. "There are journals that have been in existence for 50 years, and grant funding for people who want to study marriage. But there's very little for people who want to study singlehood. And this is the case at a time when there are almost 90 million single people in the United States."

The demographic face of the country has changed dramatically over the past several decades, according to DePaulo. The population now consists of more than 87 million Americans who are divorced, widowed, or have always been single. In addition, she noted, Americans now spend more of their adult lives single than they do married.

"Yet people are stereotyped, stigmatized, marginalized, or discriminated against for being single," she said. "It's called 'singlism' and a lot of it is legal." She cited laws that allow married workers to add spouses or domestic partners to their health care plans at reduced rates, while single workers are not afforded the same benefit, as an example of singles receiving unequal compensation for the same work. She also noted that single men often get paid less than married men, despite doing the same work at the same level of seniority and competence.

"Single people subsidize married people in smaller ways, too," she added. "For example, married people often get discounted rates on auto insurance, club memberships, and travel packages, while single people pay full price."

Using social science research methods, DePaulo examined studies that concluded married people live longer and more happily than singles and found flawed science behind many of them. In contrast, as an example of an especially high-quality study, she cited an 18-year research project that asked married and single people to rate their degrees of happiness on an annual basis. The Lifelines of Happiness Study, directed by Richard E. Lucas, professor of psychology at Michigan State University, first reported findings in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* in 2003.

"Looking at the quantified results, you can see how happy the participants were in the years before getting married, how happy they were in the early years of marriage, and how happy they were later on," she said. "There was a little blip around the wedding and honeymoon, but overall it showed that people who were happy before getting married were happy afterwards and the people who weren't happy before getting married aren't happy now. Being happy has more to do with their individual personalities than whether or not they're married."

About UC Santa Barbara

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