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Uncoupled: Experiences of Singlehood in Contemporary France

This article discusses singlehood, meaning the situation of people who, temporarily or lastingly, are not (or no longer) in a couple relationship. Singlehood has become more common over the past 50 years, as age at first partnership has risen and divorces and separations have become more frequent. In the EPIC survey on individual and conjugal trajectories (Étude des parcours individuels et conjugaux, INED–INSEE, 2013–2014, metropolitan France), 1 in 5 individuals aged 26 to 65 said they were not in a partnership, and 1 in 2 had spent at least one partnerless period (lasting a year or more) since their first serious intimate relationship (*relation amoureuse importante*).

Paradoxically, the French language has no real name for this common relationship status. In everyday conversation, people often speak of *célibat* (being single), but to demographers and sociologists this term refers to the particular civil status of people who have never married. This strict definition dates back to the time when marriage differentiated between those who had never formed a union (*célibataires*, single people), those in a union (married people), and those no longer in a union (divorcees, widows, and widowers). But with the spread of consensual unions since the 1960s, marriage no longer defines who is or is not in a partnership, and the legal categories have lost their sociological meaning. Everyday use of the term *célibat* has broken free from the legal framework and now covers anyone who is not in a partnership. In 1991, François de Singly noted that ‘literature and the press use the word *célibataires* [...] to differentiate all those who are living alone or not living with a partner from those who are living with a partner or have a family. Widows, widowers, and divorced people join the unmarried. The *célibataires* are a growing group’ (Singly, 1991, p. 75).

Since 1970, this extension of the ‘single’ category has produced a body of English-language literature on ‘singleness’ or ‘singlehood’ (Marks, 1996; Macvarish, 2006; Reynolds et al., 2007; Budgeon, 2008). This is not really the case in France,

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where studies of *célibat* have often adhered to its initial meaning. The rigidity of the terms and, through them, of the categories, sometimes leads to confusion. As Jean-Claude Kaufmann stressed in a series of articles in the 1990s, many studies do not distinguish between unmarried legal status, living without a partner, one-person households, and isolation, sometimes treating them as interchangeable (Kaufmann, 1994a, 1994b, 1994c). Thus the situation of unpartnered individuals, when it is mentioned at all, is often addressed in terms of health (depression, alcoholism, or suicide risk), sociability (relationship network and isolation), or loneliness. These studies show the particular vulnerability of unpartnered people and resonate with Durkheim's thesis highlighting the protective and regulating role of conjugality (Pan Ké Shon, 2002; Van de Velde, 2011; Pan Ké Shon and Duthé, 2013). Because singlehood is not the focus of these studies and they address it only from the standpoint of a lack of well-being, they paint a bleak and partial picture of it.

However, there are some studies of singlehood in its own right, based on qualitative interviews. These studies look at the subjective experience of singlehood and take a common approach: their analyses largely focus on women's narratives. This is true of the English-language studies and the French ones even more so. Whether addressing the history of forms of singlehood (Flahault, 2009), cultural representations of the phenomenon (Taylor, 2011), ways of understanding and experiencing the situation (Kaufmann, 1999; Macvarish, 2006; Reynolds et al., 2007), or separation and its consequences (Singly, 2011), almost all focus on women's experiences. This choice is based on the central place of the couple in women's socialization and in social images of what it is to be a 'real woman' (Clair, 2007; Monnot, 2009). This approach gives the authors no means of comparison with men. While the two genders may differ in their attitudes to couplehood and in the places they are invited to occupy in a partnership, it is not certain that singlehood is less of an issue for men, or that the experience of couplehood is not equally central to what it means to be a 'real man' (Clair, 2011; Balleys, 2016). We know little of the different experiences of singlehood and its meanings, shared or different, for the two sexes.

This article focuses on the subjective experiences of singlehood, now a recurrent situation in people's lives, and the different contexts in which it occurs. This approach has the advantage of taking into account the major changes reflected in the increasing frequency of unpartnered periods at all stages of life (Prioux et al., 2011; Buisson and Lapinte, 2013), rather than considering single people as a distinct group. It allows us to compare attitudes to singlehood and couplehood according not only to sex, age, and social background but also to relationship history (separated, divorced, widowed, or never partnered).

We have taken a dual methodological approach, comparing the results of a questionnaire survey, which we use to characterize the different forms and appreciations of singlehood and the populations concerned, with the results

Box. Linking quantitative and qualitative data on singlehood

This article is based on two kinds of empirical sources. The first source is the EPIC survey, with a sample of 7,825 people aged 26–65.* Unlike earlier surveys on couple formation in France, EPIC included unpartnered people as well as people who had partners at the time of the study and asked each one about their relationship history and current situation. While most respondents were partnered, 2,218 said they were not in ‘a couple or serious [to them] intimate relationship’ at the time of the survey and answered a special module on their experience of singlehood, their aspirations, and the attitudes of their family and social circle.

The second source is a qualitative survey conducted with 42 EPIC respondents (men and women) who were not in a couple or serious intimate relationship at the time of the survey. This set of semi-directive interviews was designed to cover the widest possible range of singlehood situations (interviewees’ relationship histories, desires, and sociodemographic characteristics). It explored subjective experiences of singlehood and their possible connection with couplehood, and how the respondent’s family and social circle viewed the situation. These interviews were studied by theme and their content analysed in terms of the respondents’ characteristics.

This article is the fruit of a cross-analysis of the two sources, each of which raises hypotheses that were re-examined with the other. The results are presented to set up a dialogue between the statistical and qualitative observations with each issue addressed. This approach also sheds light on the normative and discursive frameworks in which the data were produced.

Although the quantitative and qualitative analyses presented here cover all the respondents, regardless of sexual orientation, the samples were too small to allow an analysis of differences or similarities between hetero-, homo-, and bisexual respondents’ experiences of singlehood.

* For a presentation of the EPIC survey, see Rault and Régnier-Loilier (2019) in this issue of *Population*.

of an interview survey, which provide insight into subjective experiences of singlehood and enable us to look at the background of the views expressed. The article first looks at experiences shared by the respondents, which, despite the diversity of situations, reveal the persistent power of the conjugal norm. It then examines social and gendered differences in the subjective experience of singlehood, which are not always as expected.⁽¹⁾

I. Living without a partner: an ordinary experience?

EPIC, the first survey in France to specifically address the question of singlehood, identifies those respondents who were unpartnered at the time of the survey and provides a set of indicators for examining the extent to which singlehood is a result of choice, whether it is associated with a sense of exclusion, and its impact on various social practices. While the results show that singlehood

(1) In this article, where the English term ‘single’ is used (as a noun or adjective), it refers to any person without a serious intimate relationship, although ‘unpartnered’ is the more formal term. They are used interchangeably throughout this paper.

is widespread, the interviews reveal that it has not become a banal experience. People may appreciate it or come to terms with it more easily as it becomes more widespread, but couplehood remains the social norm.

1. The forms of contemporary singlehood

Most people aged 26–65 are in a couple: 79% of the EPIC respondents, the same percentage for both sexes, reported being in a couple or a serious intimate relationship. The same percentage of men and women (21%) are unpartnered, but they differ in the nature of their situations.

Breakups are on the rise, for men and women alike (Vanderschelden, 2006; Prioux et al., 2011), swelling the ranks of the unpartnered. Between the ages of 26 and 65, most unpartnered people are divorced or separated from a marital or civil partner (70% of unpartnered women and 65% of unpartnered men). Widowhood, by contrast, is a mainly female experience: 17% of unpartnered women, compared to only 5% of unpartnered men, are single due to the death of their partners. Men are more likely to have never been in a serious intimate relationship (30% versus 13% for women) and more likely to have been in a non-cohabiting couple (20% versus 13% for women).

These gender differences in types of singlehood are due partly to the difference in partnership timing between men and women. Figure 1 shows how male and female singlehood patterns differ according to age. Because men form partnerships later than women, a higher proportion of them are unpartnered

Figure 1. Rates and types of singlehood by age group and sex (%)



Coverage: Individuals aged 26 to 65 living in metropolitan France.

Interpretation: Of men aged 45 to 49, 18.5% are unpartnered and 4.7% have never had a serious intimate relationship.

Source: EPIC (INED–INSEE, 2013–2014).

when young. There is a turning point around the age of 30 for both sexes. Many people form cohabiting partnerships at this age, and the proportion of unpartnered people falls sharply. After the age of 39, the proportion of women living without a partner rises and does not really drop afterward. Separations, divorces, and spousal deaths leave more and more women partnerless. This is not the case for men, for whom there is more fluctuation in the trend. While age 30–34 marks a peak for the number of partnered women, age has less of an impact on men in this regard; they are more likely to repartner, they do so more quickly after a breakup (Cassan et al., 2005; Toulemon, 2012), and they are far less likely to be widowed (Delbès and Gaymu, 2005).

Experiences and appreciations of singlehood also differ. When asked to what extent they have chosen singlehood, a majority of respondents said either ‘It’s a choice’ (46% of women and 34% of men) or ‘It is not really a choice, but it suits me’ (25% of women and 28% of men). In general, women are more affirmative and accept their situation more readily than men; men are more likely to say they would like a serious intimate relationship (28% versus 24% of women) or would like a relationship (or more than one) without commitment (7% of men, 4% of women).

People’s view of singlehood is also linked to their past experience (Figure 2). Those who have had one or more serious intimate relationships without cohabitation express a more marked desire for a couple relationship and are less likely to say that singlehood is a choice. Conversely, those who have been married or in a civil union or those who are widowed, are more likely to say

Figure 2. Unpartnered people’s attitudes towards of singlehood by sex and partnership experience



Question: ‘Regarding singlehood: (1) It’s my choice; (2) It’s not really a choice, but the situation suits me; (3) I would like to have a serious intimate relationship; (4) I would like to have a relationship, or more than one, without committing myself’.

Coverage: Unpartnered people aged 26 to 65 living in metropolitan France.

Source: EPIC (INED–INSEE, 2013–2014).

singlehood is a choice. As a result, the desire to be in a couple is more pronounced among those who have not shared a home with a partner, especially around the age of 30. This trend applies to both men and women but is more marked among women, whose relationship to singlehood (and, by implication, to couplehood) depends more on their past experiences.

Various questions in the EPIC survey were designed to establish whether singlehood facilitates, complicates, or makes no difference to various aspects of daily and social life.⁽²⁾ Whichever aspect they were asked about, respondents who answered that singlehood ‘makes no difference’ were always the most numerous: 48% of women and 42% of men for daily life in general, 53% of women and 54% of men for leisure activities, 56% and 53% for going out with friends, 55% and 56% for going on holiday, and 61% and 62% for inviting friends or being invited. When it was said to have an impact, this was more often said to be negative than positive and was mainly reported by single parents living with a child under the age of 15. These single parents—mostly single mothers⁽³⁾—were the most likely to say that singlehood makes things more difficult in daily life (38% versus 27% of those without children) or in going on holiday (27% versus 19%). However, many single parents thought that singlehood ‘makes no difference’ in daily life (38% versus 46% of singles without children) or even made it ‘easier’ (21% versus 22%).

The EPIC survey gives an initial picture of life without a partner that is far more nuanced than the depictions presented in the media that swing from abject misery to unbridled enthusiasm. The qualitative survey takes us further. It shows, beyond differences of social background and gender, the common experiences of singlehood and, by extension, how society sees singlehood today.

2. Reminders of the conjugal norm and denigration of singlehood

Analysis of the interviews shows that respondents perceived a discrepancy between the spread of singlehood (intermittent or lasting) and the persistence of a dominant conjugal norm. Whether from their personal observation of their family and social circle or from information disseminated through the media, many interviewees mentioned the increase in numbers of unpartnered people, separations, and single-parent families. They tended to downplay singlehood as an increasingly common situation, while emphasizing the fragile nature of romantic and conjugal ties: ‘There are lots of people living alone. It’s true; it’s practically becoming a normal thing’ (Woman, 32, divorced, one child, clerical/sales worker). But it is not fully accepted as a normal thing, and most interviewees saw couplehood and family as the model society still values more:

(2) The questions were framed as follows: ‘For you, as regards daily life in general, going on holiday, etc., does singlehood ... (1) make it easier, (2) make it more difficult, (3) make no difference, (4) not concerned, (5) don’t know.’

(3) Between the ages of 26 and 65, 22% of unpartnered women and 6% of unpartnered men were living with a child under the age of 15.

Today, compared to 20 or 30 years ago, it's more socially accepted, after all, to be single.... But even so, generally speaking, there's a dominant model, and that is the model of the couple with children. (Man, 50, separated, higher-level occupation)

Somehow, the couple is the norm, in fact, like it or not, I think anyway. And if you're not in a couple, you're not conforming. (Man, 31, never partnered, clerical/sales worker)

The interviewees say little to substantiate this conjugal norm. It is a diffuse norm, but analysis of the interviews shows that the respondents were confronted with it in practical terms through remarks made by the people around them. Regardless of their social characteristics, partnership history, and desires, all the interviewees had been exposed to 'innocuous' (*petites*) questions, incitements, or interventions by family members, friends, or colleagues. They were reminded that couplehood is the model to follow and that singlehood is not supposed to last long:

It's often remarks like 'So, still on your own then?' or 'When are you going to introduce your girlfriend?' ... but it's still, like, kindly. (Man, 36, never partnered, manual worker)

When a cousin got married at the age of 60, my aunt said 'Ah, Dorothy, you've still got a chance! [laughs]. (Woman, 59, never partnered, intermediate-level occupation)

The interviews are dotted with such comments and questions from the people around them. They most often come from women: female friends, neighbours, colleagues, sisters, aunts, and, especially, mothers. Analysis of the interviews shows that pressure to conform to the conjugal norm is applied to everyone, men and women alike, but is not applied *by* everyone. Women, whose social role puts them at the heart of the family and intergenerational ties, are its main channels.

Few interviewees present this interference as actual pressure. The questions of friends and relations are mentioned in passing and often minimised, described as well-meaning: it is 'for a laugh', 'not insistent', 'not unkind'. Its repetition even gives it a ritual function—it is the 'inevitable' question—which makes it easier to accept. Nonetheless, these remarks of kindly concern can irritate or hurt, especially when they resonate with uncertain or unfulfilled personal aspirations:

I couldn't have a family dinner without someone asking me where I was with my life. ... 'Have you got a boyfriend? Where are you at with that? Are you going to start a new life? I hate that expression, as if you absolutely needed someone to start a new life. (Woman, 38, civil union dissolved, two children, intermediate-level occupation)

People have even organised blind dates for me, something I didn't even think was done any more. ... Does my case really look so desperate that they think I need a blind date? (Man, 50, separated, higher-level occupation)

Separation, divorce, and widowhood do not discourage friends and relations. The encouragement to repartner begins as soon as a person has got over their breakup or completed their grieving.⁽⁴⁾ There is no age limit for repartnering. That was true in agricultural society, where the gendered division of labour was a strong incentive for widows and widowers to remarry (Pressat, 1956; Cabourdin, 1978). It is also true in contemporary society, where the emotional and psychological benefits attributed to couplehood encourage the separated or widowed to 'start a new life'. While 70% of the EPIC respondents (and 80% of unpartnered respondents) thought it is possible to 'have a successful life without a partner', whether one can really be happy without a partner is a different question. The idea of 'success' can be associated with the occupational sphere; the interviews made it unambiguously clear that the couple is central to society's image of happiness:

It's rooted in society that you have to be in a couple to be happy. (Man, 36, never partnered, manual worker)

I think people want to see you happy, your family and friends. And so, very often, people have the idea that being in a couple...well, that being alone is not being happy. (Woman, 53, separated, one child, higher-level occupation)

It is as if the happiness or well-being of a person with no partner were not credible. Very few interviewees said that friends and relations sometimes envy their singlehood. When they did, it was because of the happy or fulfilled image that the interviewee's attitude conveyed, which contradicts or confuses the stereotypical image of the unhappy single. These disparaging representations of life without a partner as being neither happy nor truly a choice are present in much cultural output (films, books, TV, etc.) as well as in scientific language and research. For example, the EPIC survey, when exploring respondents' representations, asks whether one can 'have a successful life without a partner', and not whether one can 'have a successful life with a partner'. The approach is asymmetrical, as are the questions asked of singles, such as 'So, still on your own?' No one asks, 'So, still in a couple?' Talk of singlehood, even in research work, is loaded with assumptions.

Respondent (man, 39, separated, business owner): Well, I can't say I'm the right person to be telling you about life as a single because I'm very happy. I live my life fully!

Interviewer: But I'm not looking for unhappy people who are miserable being single [laughter].

The potential tension between personal experience, self-image, and social representations raises questions about the way the experience of singlehood can be addressed in an interview or a questionnaire. Deconstruction of the

(4) Children do this as well. As adults they encourage their parent to repartner: 'Dad, why aren't you looking for someone? Lucie [a neighbour], for example' (Man, 66, divorced, seven children, manual worker). Even small children observe, compare, and question: 'Are we going to have a step-daddy too?' (Woman, 41, divorced, three children, manual worker)

figure of the unhappy single is at work. Although pejorative terms like ‘confirmed bachelor’ and ‘old maid’ are no longer in use, life without a partner, especially over a long period, is still tainted by stereotypes.

The interviews suggest that the diversification of partnership histories and forms of unions (consensual unions, marriage, civil unions, non-cohabiting relationships) has neither weakened the conjugal norm nor led to a genuine acknowledgement of singlehood. People seem expected more than ever to form a partnership or to repartner. No situation is, in itself, considered a reason to drop the ideal of couplehood.

3. Freedom and moments of loneliness

Many of the singles who did not desire a romantic relationship said it was in order to ‘keep their freedom, not to be accountable to anyone’ (44% of women and 50% of men).⁽⁵⁾ The sense of freedom was also the positive aspect most frequently mentioned in interviews: ‘total’ freedom was an ‘undeniable advantage’ giving respondents the ability to do what they want when they want and with whomever they want. This freedom is in small, everyday things in the home (meals, TV programmes, what colour to repaint the wall), but it is also a much-appreciated freedom to improvise. From ‘eating at any hour’ or ‘deciding at the last minute’ to ‘coming home very late from work’ or ‘hunting wild boar at 2 a.m.’, many examples focus on spontaneity of choice. They highlight time-management patterns that are not only free but also out of step with society’s timetable (for meals, rest, work, etc.) and demonstrate a taste for whimsy that contrasts sharply with stereotyped representations of the unpartnered person’s supposedly monotonous life. Implicitly or not, this presentation highlights the narrower and more constrained framework of life in a couple, where time and activities must be planned and sociabilities negotiated.

The flip side of this freedom is loneliness. This is the disadvantage of singlehood that interviewees mentioned most often. They spoke of ‘feeling lonely’ rather than of being isolated. While isolation is a lack or infrequency of contact with other people, it is possible to feel lonely even surrounded by family and friends. People who live alone are generally less isolated than those living with a partner, as they have more outside contacts, but they are more likely to feel lonely (Pan Ké Shon, 1999). Our interviews also suggest this, but they reveal a more nuanced and varied range of feelings. Loneliness differs from solitude; one can adapt to solitude and even appreciate it, especially if it is intermittent. While loneliness can be a daily experience, it is often limited to certain situations, places, activities, and times (evenings,

(5) Other, less frequent reasons were also given: having been disappointed too often (25% of women and 19% of men), preferring to focus on work, studies, or other activities (11% of women, 18% of men). The widowed very often (52%) mentioned the memory of their deceased partner, and parents mentioned that children come first (35% of women and 25% of men). Very few people (1% of women and 6% of men) mentioned subjective age, feeling ‘too young’ or ‘too old’.

weekends) when the absence of a significant other to ‘talk with’ and for ‘reassurance’ and ‘support’ makes itself felt. Places like restaurants, which are strongly associated with couplehood, are dreaded and avoided. These are precisely the situations that expose singlehood as a deviation from the norm (Van de Velde, 2011).

Going away for the weekend, for example. A weekend away is completely a couple activity...I hate eating alone in a restaurant, it's awful. It's really—you find yourself all alone, everyone around you is with a partner. (Man, 50, separated, higher-level occupation)

This year, I am also going on holiday alone, and it's very complicated for me, psychologically, to tell myself, ‘Right, I'm forcing myself go to a restaurant alone, to the campsite alone.’ But, well, I'm not alone in going on holiday alone! Loads of people do it! (Woman, 47, separated, two children, clerical/sales worker)

Holidays are among the times when couples are conspicuous, and a restaurant is a common place for couples to display themselves. These are social situations where singlehood feels most like loneliness. They are ‘places of unease’ where the couple model ‘is obvious to all’ (Kaufmann, 1999, p. 47). The EPIC survey confirms that some activities are predominantly couple activities: for example, 81% of those with a partner at the time of the survey said they always or almost always spent holidays with their partner. Holidays are a couple activity.

This unease in certain leisure situations adds nuance to the EPIC survey's findings that singlehood has no impact on social practices. While singlehood may not necessarily affect the existence or intensity of such activities, the interviews show that it certainly changes the nature of the activities and who they are shared with. Some leisure activities are avoided or managed differently to avoid being exposed to the stigma and discomfort of doing them alone.⁽⁶⁾ It may not be less common for unpartnered people to have guests to dinner or to be invited, but the social circle is different. Many interviewees said that ‘as a single person, you're often surrounded by singles’ (Man, 36, never partnered, manual worker). The explanation for this is that singles (without small children to care for) can improvise their outings and get-togethers, and they share similar concerns and topics of discussion. But singles and couples also avoid each other, reinforcing the tendency to stick to one's kind. Singles do not want to be ‘alone’ among couples. Being ‘unattached’, they can be seen as a risk or, as one respondent said, ‘bad company’ who might endanger another couple's stability. Singlehood shapes, alters, and splits social networks and ways of being with friends:

(6) Doing things with a club; renting a self-catering flat for holidays to avoid the trial of eating alone in restaurants; lunching at a café but with mobile in hand, etc. Communication tools like smartphones, laptops, and tablets are an important development, as they enable people to both not be out and not appear alone.

There have been times when I refused invitations because I knew there would be seven of us, three couples and me. There have been times when that was a bad experience for me. (Woman, 34, separated, higher-level occupation)

Of course there are couples who think a person on their own is a threat! There are plenty of them! [...] When I was in a couple, I was...we were invited to dinner with other couples, and now that I'm single, I'm invited more to singles dinners. (Man, 50, separated, higher-level occupation)

At the junction between solitude and freedom, singlehood is also often depicted as an enriching experience, albeit trying at times. Because it both allows and obliges people to 'make their own decisions', 'cope on their own', and 'stretch their limits', it is presented as a time for self-reflection, enabling one to rebuild, enjoy centres of interest, identify priorities, and learn to know oneself. No doubt, this way of seeing and experiencing singlehood is only meaningful in a psychologized society (Castel et al., 2008). We speak of finding or restoring balance, of well-being, of being in tune with oneself, with a certain idea of authenticity and self-care. Our respondents did not ignore or minimize the financial, occupational, and family difficulties; on the contrary, they greatly value overcoming them and 'moving ahead', as it boosts or restores their pride, confidence, and self-esteem. The increasing complexity of conjugal, family, and occupational histories is fertile ground for these values of independence and resourcefulness. As Cécile Van de Velde has pointed out, it obliges people to become mobile, flexible, and capable of adapting to change. It results in an 'ethic of responsibility for oneself in lives that are more and more discontinuous' (Van de Velde, 2011, p. 32). Periods of singlehood prove to be restricting yet especially propitious for 'self-fulfilment' or 'being empowered' by proving self-sufficiency.

These invaluable learning processes and experiences of freedom, authenticity, and responsibility are central to conjugal aspirations: they reshape them. While 40% of unpartnered people in the EPIC survey said they had chosen singlehood, the interviews remind us that this choice is not set in stone. For some, singlehood became a choice over time, with the advantages they found in it. For others, it was a choice at one point—when they were younger or after a breakup—but it no longer is. At the time of the follow-up interview, some had already repartnered,⁽⁷⁾ some hoped to do so, and some rejected the idea. The experience of singlehood affects aspirations regarding conjugality and ways of being in a couple. From this standpoint, preserving personal space emerges as a strong ideal that influences the type of partnership desired (consensual union or non-cohabiting partnership rather than marriage). While studies of partnership histories tend to disregard periods of singlehood as merely 'slack time', this research shows that it is an active period that affects partnership practices and representations of conjugality:

(7) Ten people who were re-interviewed 12 to 18 months after the EPIC survey had repartnered; in the questionnaire, eight had reported that their singlehood was a choice or that it suited them.

I think [solo living] was a necessary passage for me, for self-discovery and also my sexuality; I think there was something I'd missed there. I think that's important. (Woman, 38, in a couple, two children, intermediate-level occupation)

The EPIC survey confirms that singlehood plays a socializing role. It shows that life without a partner leads to greater independence within the couple: the more unpartnered periods one has had, the less likely one is to form an intensely close relationship in which social activities (seeing friends or family, going on holidays, etc.) are usually done together, or to consider that 'being a couple means doing everything together'.⁽⁸⁾ Although the spread of singlehood is usually explained in terms of a change in partnership norms, perhaps singlehood is changing partnerships. Experience of singlehood nourishes the often stressed desire to be 'free together' (Singly, 2009).

Although singlehood covers a wide range of life situations, both the quantitative and qualitative surveys show that it involves experiences shared by all unpartnered people, so it is worth addressing the subject as a whole. Singlehood reveals the strength of the conjugal norm as a pressure that is exerted at all ages and on both sexes. This norm stems from a rhetoric that posits couplehood as an essential condition for a 'happy life' (which is a strong ideal in contemporary society) and therefore depreciates singlehood and relegates it to a certain unhappiness that has to be endured. This persists despite the contrary image sometimes depicted in the press⁽⁹⁾ and some recent research (Klinenberg, 2012). This normative context affects the experience of singlehood for everyone, but there are significant differences.

II. Experiences that differ by class and gender

Objective living conditions and subjective experiences of singlehood vary according to the individual's life history and characteristics. The way people speak of it differs according to their social background, particularly for women.

1. Costs and benefits of contemporary singlehood

The experience of singlehood is not the same in all social environments, which is hardly surprising. But the differences are not those portrayed in the print media and in essays, where singlehood is often depicted as a new lifestyle, wholeheartedly adopted, with upper-middle-class individuals as its pioneers and principal participants (Lardellier, 2006; Klinenberg, 2012). Writers describe the 'new singles' as young, urban professionals in higher-

(8) Of those who had never been unpartnered for more than a year since their first romantic relationship, 49% thought that 'being a couple means doing everything together', compared to 34% of those who had had two or more periods of singlehood since their first relationship.

(9) For example, the evocatively titled article, 'The rise of the alpha single' in *The Times*, March 2018.

level occupations who either choose or at least adapt well to singlehood. Implicit (and sometimes explicit) in this is the idea that ‘happiness as a single person is accessible to those who are financially independent’ (*Atlantico*, 31 August 2016). This image of fulfilling singlehood as a characteristic of the higher social strata is not an accurate reflection of reality as captured by the EPIC survey. All else being equal, people in intermediate- and higher-level occupations are less likely than manual workers to say that singlehood is a choice. And they are more likely than manual workers to say that they feel, sometimes or often, excluded because they are not in a couple (Table 1). These contrasts can also be seen if individuals are compared by educational level. Those with a bachelor’s degree or higher are less likely than less educated people to say that their singlehood is a choice and more likely to say they feel excluded (results not presented).

In fact, higher-educated men and women are also less likely to be unpartnered than those with less education (Bouchet-Valat, 2015). This trend is strongest for men but is also true of women. Until the 1990s, female graduates were more likely to be unpartnered than were women who left the education system early, but in France today, the reverse is the case (Daguet and Niel, 2010; Bouchet-Valat, 2015). The lower prevalence of singlehood in the higher social classes seems to coincide with a stronger conjugal norm. This may reflect a desire to ‘have a successful life’—in both the professional and private spheres—or just the power of what appears to be ‘normal’: couplehood is expected because it is more common. Conversely, among the working class, where singlehood, single-parent families, and lifelong singlehood are more common, there may be less stigma attached and less exclusion.

Class differences are compounded by gender difference. The divergence between social classes in the way singlehood is experienced is much sharper among women. And women in lower social echelons—manual, clerical, and sales workers—stand especially apart. These women are the most likely to present their singlehood as a choice (50%), far ahead of women in the higher-level and intellectual professions (25%). They are also more likely to consider that life without a partner ‘makes no difference’ in their everyday life (43% versus 34%), whereas women in higher-level occupations are more likely to say that singlehood makes their lives ‘more difficult’ (42% versus 30%). These differences are even greater when parenthood is involved: single mothers in privileged social environments report many more difficulties associated with singlehood than do those who are manual or clerical/sales workers.

This finding may seem paradoxical. Low-income women, especially single mothers, adapt most easily to singlehood, a situation that is known to impoverish women (Bonnet et al., 2016). However, the interviews shed some light on it, showing that while singlehood ‘is costly’ for women, particularly for low-income women, this is also true of couplehood.

Table 1. Effect of sociodemographic characteristics on perception of singlehood (logistic regression)

	Singlehood experienced as a 'choice'	Feeling of exclusion (sometimes or often)
Constant	-0.320	-0.990
Sex		
Man (Ref.)	0	0
Woman	0.140 **	0.154 **
Age		
26–29 (Ref.)	0	0
30–34	-0.519 **	0.365 *
35–39	-0.027	-0.074
40–44	0.048	0.065
45–49	0.030	-0.177
50–54	0.076	0.057
55–59	0.147	0.085
60–65	0.315 **	-0.287 *
Socio-occupational category		
Farmers	-0.533	0.166
Self-employed in business or trade	-0.282	0.024
Managers, professionals, and higher-level intellectual occupations	-0.499 **	0.387 *
Intermediate-level occupations	-0.380 *	0.490 **
Clerical and sales workers	-0.038	0.212
Manual workers (Ref.)	0	0
Not economically active	0.028	0.068
Place of residence		
Rural area (Ref.)	0	0
Pop. 2,000 to 19,000	0.080	-0.023
Pop. 20,000 to 199,000	-0.106	0.104
Pop. 200,000 to 2 million	0.062	0.320 **
Greater Paris conurbation	-0.047	-0.382 **
Relationship experience		
Never partnered (Ref.)	0	0
Separated (non-cohabitation)	-0.358 **	0.100
Separated (cohabitation)	-0.105	-0.187 *
Divorced / Civil union dissolved	0.052	0.071
Widowed	0.351 **	0.035
Parental situation		
Not living with a child (below age 15) (Ref.)	0	0
Living with a child or children (below age 15)	0.121	-0.064
Number of affirmative responses	861	719
Weighted percentage of affirmative responses	39.9%	32.0%
Likelihood ratio test	***	***
<p>Interpretation: All else being equal, those in managerial or higher-level intellectual occupations are less likely to describe singlehood as a choice than are manual workers, and more likely than manual workers to have already felt excluded because of their singlehood.</p> <p>Coverage: Unpartnered people aged 26 to 65 living in metropolitan France.</p> <p>Statistical significance: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.</p> <p>Source: EPIC (INED–INSEE, 2013–2014).</p>		

2. An experience of independence won or regained

Analysis of the interviews corresponds to the EPIC results. It shows that for women, singlehood becomes progressively less satisfactory and less desired for the future as educational level and social status rise. Women with manual, clerical, and sales jobs, especially those who have already lived in a couple, are those that emphasize most strongly the genuinely positive advantages of singlehood. They do not gloss over the acrobatics required to reconcile work and family life, the financial difficulties, the occupational or residential insecurity, the responsibilities, and the pressures that come with being partnerless, especially for those with children to raise. But these difficulties are not new and not very different from those they knew in couplehood. Many stress that their role and workload have not changed: whether alone or with a partner, they have to ‘get organized’, ‘do everything’, and ‘manage everything’.

I already did everything myself. So separation has changed absolutely nothing. ... For everything to do with my home, my daughter, etc., at that level I was already independent. But against my will. I had no choice! Whereas this is a choice. (Woman, 32, divorced, one child, clerical/sales worker)

What changes with singlehood, and is particularly highlighted by low-income women, is the freedom to decide—with constraints, certainly, but independently, accountable to no one. Money management is emblematic of this gain in autonomy. Interviewees speak of it not only in terms of financial difficulty—the challenge and the ability to handle expenses on their own⁽¹⁰⁾—they also talk in terms of independent access to and use of their income. Studies of money management in couples have found greater autonomy in couples where the partners are of high social status⁽¹¹⁾ (Ponthieux, 2012); so being able to manage a budget without negotiations represents a new freedom and a significant advantage for women with manual, clerical, and sales jobs more than the rest:

I do what I want, when I want. I don't have to say, ‘Hey, I've bought this ... it costs this much’. I don't have to give a report on money matters. It's the same with the children; there's nobody to say, ‘You shouldn't say *this* to them, you shouldn't do *that*, you ought to yell at them for *this*, not yell at them for *that*. (Woman, 41, divorced, three children, manual worker)

The independence singlehood provides also affects areas like child-rearing decisions, outings, social activities, tastes, and leisure, where it does not only concern the poorest social strata. In these areas, singlehood contrasts with couplehood as it was experienced in the past or observed in one's social circle.

(10) Many interviewees, both men and women, mentioned that singlehood brought a drop in living standards and an increase in financial insecurity.

(11) For example, the proportion of couples who pool all their money (the most frequent pattern) decreases as incomes and educational levels rise (Ponthieux, 2012).

It is here that gender relations and subordination are sometimes very marked, oppressive, and even depersonalizing.⁽¹²⁾

I always had—I had a husband, I was married!—jealous and possessive men who wanted to control everything or...You just had to resign to being a woman, second place, but they didn't let me choose for myself or...make my own decisions. And that, huh, that won't do. (Woman, 32, divorced, one child, clerical/sales worker)

I had to not do that, I had to listen to such-and-such radio station, the one I listened to was no good. The books I read were no good. I had to get *Télérama*, not a basic TV guide...If I wanted to do something...I had to arrange it so it was he who decided, who had the idea. A bit like a boss, actually. (Woman, 55, separated, one child, intermediate occupation)

It is this autonomy, a new or rediscovered source of self-esteem, that women—especially those whose experience or representation of the couple is the most unequal in terms of gender relations—are strongly attached to and do not want to compromise in a new couple relationship. Of course, lack of time and a tight daily schedule sometimes leave little space for even thinking about a romantic encounter. But it is also these women who frequently mention the increase in separations and divorces and project the most critical and disillusioned view of the couple as a site of fulfilment. They aspire least to couplehood. They often question the place of a male partner in the home and when they consider a relationship, they would prefer a non-cohabiting one. While the idea of the couple is never wholly excluded,⁽¹³⁾ when these women imagine a partner that would suit them, it is with levity and a hint of bitterness: 'A lorry driver! [laughter] He comes home at weekends!' (Woman, 41, divorced, three children, manual worker).

Singlehood not only boosts the self-esteem of low-income women; these women are also more appreciated socially. Even if their lives are not seen as desirable or happy, their friends and relations accept and value them (especially mothers) more than is the case in the higher social echelons. Where conjugal mobility is high, the couplehood norm and the social depreciation of singlehood seem to weigh less heavily. In the higher social strata, despite the unequal division of parental and domestic labour in their partnerships (Champagne et al., 2015), women do not find singlehood to be a space of new or rediscovered personal independence. They more often describe not being invited by couples since they have been on their own; their social sphere seems affected and reshaped by singlehood more than is the case for low-income women. And despite painful breakups, they do not convey such a disenchanting image of

(12) This paper does not address domestic violence, which the interviews did reveal and which is also found in all social classes (Jaspard et al., 2003).

(13) Even among those who did not want to be in a couple (again or for the first time), there are few whose interviews give no sign of ambiguity, contradiction, or opening towards conjugal aspirations. When the social image of the couple is one of happiness, it is no doubt difficult to completely renounce it.

couplehood. The aspiration to be with a partner and make plans together is stronger among women in higher social strata.

III. The critical age for singlehood

In addition to differences by class and gender, the experience of singlehood varies by age. There are certain times of life when it is harder to accept. This is true of the early 30s, a ‘critical moment’ when couplehood becomes particularly pressing.

1. Uneasy 30-year-olds

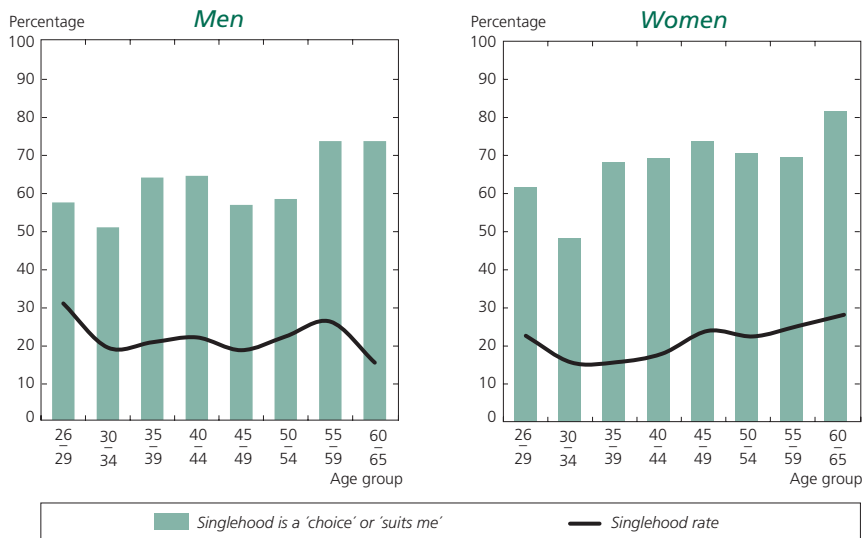
The EPIC survey’s various indicators agree: young men and women aged 30 to 34 are the least enthusiastic and often negative about their singlehood. Only 22% of them say it is chosen, and they are keener than other age groups to find a partner. They are more likely to try to set up situations for meeting someone, notably via online dating sites: 44% of unpartnered people aged 30–34 already used a dating site compared to a 27% average for all unpartnered respondents. If singlehood is burdensome, it is partly because the social pressure is felt most strongly at this age. Singles in their early 30s felt more strongly that their family and friends were trying to match them with someone (56% of singles aged 30–34 versus 38% for all singles aged 26–65), and they were more likely to have led their family to believe there was someone in their lives (18% versus 11%).

It was especially people who had never lived with a partner who expressed this uneasiness in the survey. Because the early 30s is a peak for partnership formation, the desire to form a couple is strong among those who have not yet ‘settled down’. This is especially true for women, who start their partnership history earlier and whose fertile lifespan is shorter. Dissatisfaction with singlehood reflects a desire to start a life of partnership and parenthood, after many others have already started. However, these ‘late starters’ are not the only ones to be dissatisfied with singlehood. So are some who have already lived with a partner, including some who are already parents. There is specifically an age effect. Regardless of partnership and parenting history, people aged 30–34 are significantly less likely than others to say that singlehood is a choice and more likely to feel excluded (Table 1).

This dissatisfaction may also be connected with being in a minority. Figure 3 shows that the tendency to experience singlehood as a choice or an acceptable situation varies in tandem with the percentage of singles in the population at each age. The link is clear for both sexes and all age groups, except for men aged 60–65. It seems that singlehood is more enjoyable for those whose peers are single too, and less enjoyable when it is less common. And the early 30s is precisely the age when the percentage of singles is lowest—

which does not escape the notice of the partnerless young, who see friends of their age coupling up and feel their social lives changing. Being in a minority, they feel marginalized. The statistical norm and the social norm run parallel.

Figure 3. Rate of singlehood and rate of satisfaction with singlehood by sex and age group



Coverage: Unpartnered people aged 26 to 65 living in metropolitan France.

Source: EPIC (INED-INSEE, 2013–2014).

The interviews corroborate this idea of a breakpoint around the age of 30. Although couplehood is compounded by parenthood for women more than for men, at this age both men and women express a desire to live with a partner and a feeling of being out of step:

Especially when you get to 30...if you're not in a couple...not settled, you don't fit. (Man, 31, never partnered, clerical/sales worker)

Well, I think that for a while now, because of my age, I say to myself, look, I'm 30. If I want children, even if I met someone today, I wouldn't have children in six months' time. So of course the pressure's on, more and more. (Woman, 30, never partnered, higher-level occupation)

I don't think people see you the same way when you're 30 as when you're 20. ... At 20, I think people are still studying; they're not really there yet.... Then at 30, people are more settled, let's say. Well, if they haven't found someone at 30, well, when will they? (Man, 31, never partnered, clerical/sales worker)

The personal and social pressure gets stronger around the age of 30. At family get-togethers, uncles, aunts, and grandparents are eager for news of a romance: 'So when do we get to meet her/him?' It is assumed as self-evident that young people long for couplehood; the question is not whether but when the partner will be introduced. The very question assumes there is a partner and that the

relationship is heterosexual. Parents also probe the issue, mothers especially, often in terms of grandchildren: ‘When am I going to be a grandmother?’ (Man, 31, never partnered, clerical/sales worker). There is also a jocular approach based on gender complicity (mother–daughter, father–son): ‘My father, it’s more like “How many have you met this week?”’ (Man, 28, intermediate occupation). The peer group is another powerful source of hints, comparisons, and reflections. A certain ‘statistical normality’ is explicit in some interviews:

Nowadays, it isn’t normal not be in a couple at my age, in fact. Now, I have very few friends, I mean, I have some but very few who are single. ... I’m more in the minority, actually. And it affects me, um, it affects me because it bugs the shit out of me, because, clearly, it weighs on me.... Yeah, it’s, like, not being like the others. I’m now part of the minority, in fact. I don’t fit into that setup. And that pisses me off because I’d really like to, I’d like to be in a couple, to feel good... So in fact I feel a bit excluded because I want to be like that, and I’m not. (Man, 28, never partnered, intermediate occupation)

Our analysis of the interviews agrees with the EPIC results: around the age of 30, comparison with peers puts a particularly bright spotlight on the conjugal norm and exacerbates the feeling of marginality.

2. Starting a cohabiting partnership: an act of institution?

Other factors also shed light on the unease felt around the age of 30. Many interviewees, whatever their age, spoke of ‘being in a couple’ in terms of personal capability or aptitude: of ‘knowing how’ or ‘having known how’ to be in a couple or, if not, having ‘something missing’, a ‘disability’, a ‘hidden defect’, a ‘disease’, or a ‘flaw’. As with ‘first time rites’ (Bozon, 2002), entry to couplehood (which is central to elective bonds), while not necessarily marking a passage to a new, stable, and irreversible status, has a ‘performative’ personal and social dimension in that it qualifies the person, integrates them, and also reassures them and removes self-doubt:

To me, what doesn’t fit the pattern is a bit of a flaw. It’s that you’re not...you don’t have the aptitude, you’re incapable of...And that’s my fear, in fact. Am I actually capable of being in a couple? Do I have the capacity for it? Do I have some defect? (Man, 28, never partnered, intermediate occupation)

The issues involved in partnership formation in the 30–34 age group, the age at which the majority of people are in cohabiting unions, have much in common with the properties and functions of the rites that Pierre Bourdieu (1982) analysed as ‘acts of institution’. Taking a cue from Bourdieu, one can suggest that, if the formalization of the rite is less important than its function, partnership formation can be diluted or varied as far as the rite is concerned.⁽¹⁴⁾ It still fulfils its instituting function: it separates from a former status and group

(14) In other words, one may marry, form a civil union, or move in together; what counts is that the partnership formation be socially visible, unlike juvenile love affairs, which are constituents of the private sphere of adolescence (Bozon, 2002).

(juvenile), integrates into new groups and statuses (adult, couple, parent), and institutes the gendered roles of man and woman as marriage used to do. Sociabilities, as we have seen, tend to be split between couples and unpartnered people. Partnership formation bestows a social differentiation and a symbolic value that can no longer be identified from a title (Mrs versus Miss), but it still marks those who have not formed a partnership by a certain age. These people are then stigmatized through arbitrary beliefs ('singles are unhappy') and suspicion (unpartnered people have a 'flaw', are 'defective' or 'ill').

In this way, partnership formation distinguishes initiates and non-initiates (those who are or will be in a partnership) from those who supposedly never will be. While there is no age limit for forming a new partnership, this is not the case for a first partnership. As the EPIC survey shows, only 7% of men and women form their first cohabiting partnership after the age of 30, and about 1% after the age of 40. From this standpoint, although there is now greater flexibility in the timing and types of partnership formation, the age of 30 may signal the moment when a person risks no longer being eligible, or 'marriageable' in Louis Henry's terms (Henry, 1969). Singles are reminded of their difference by their family's ritual or injunctive questions and by comparison with their peers. Interviewees' descriptions of 'hardened' singles⁽¹⁵⁾ and the testimony of older singles also point to the issues underlying first partnership formation, which, though reversible, nonetheless institutes a new status.

The breakpoint at age 30 closes a juvenile period when being in a couple or not is less of an issue, personally and socially. Between personal aspirations and social norms, being partnerless is enjoyed less by those aged 30–34 and is harder to be proud of: 'I'm not going to boast of being in the wrong slot! [laughter]' (Man, 31, never partnered, clerical/sales occupation). After a certain time, for those who are still single, the questions and comments by friends and (especially) family taper off; this seems to close this critical period. The age of 30 seems to crystallize the issue of differentiation between temporary, reversible, singlehood—experienced as a period in a partnership history—and lasting, definitive singlehood, seen as an unhappy condition.

Conclusion

The transformation of relationship patterns over recent decades, with a diversification of forms of union and increasing frequency of serial partnerships and singlehood, has not weakened the conjugal norm. On the contrary, couplehood is still the main gateway to parenthood and is strongly associated with contemporary ideas of happiness and personal fulfilment. For men and women alike, the social status attached to singlehood is inferior to that bestowed

(15) 'He [a friend] lives with his parents...He folds his pyjamas, puts his slippers by his bed, etc...He doesn't like being disturbed in his life.' (Woman, 53, separated, one child, higher-level occupation)

on couples. In the periods of singlehood that punctuate partnership history, people face repeated promptings to start a new partnership.

The interview survey captured expressions of this diffuse but effective conjugal norm. Is society more lenient towards singlehood today than in the past? At the turn of the 20th century, singlehood was still an integral part of the matrimonial system (Hajnal, [1965] 2008). While unmarried people in farming societies suffered a lack of social consideration, their situation was nonetheless 'normal' because it was taken for granted (Bourdieu, 1962, p. 58; 2002). The recent diversification of partnership histories has made singlehood a far more commonplace phenomenon in reality than in representations. The opening of other ways to experience relationships seems to have strengthened rather than weakened the conjugal norm: a number of forms of partnership are now possible, as long as one opts for couplehood.

Against the background of this norm, the experience of singlehood varies widely according to social environment, age, and sex. Current cultural representations of the 'new singles' feature beaming urban executives in their 30s who have chosen singlehood as a new lifestyle. However, it is precisely the 30–34 age group, graduates and higher-level professionals, women in particular, who are the least satisfied with singlehood and the most likely to feel excluded. Around the age when people form their first partnership, far from being applauded as a 'new lifestyle', singlehood is a particularly difficult experience, since singles are by then in the minority and fear they may 'miss the boat'. And it is not the higher social echelons who most often present their singlehood as a choice, but low-income women who, despite the accompanying difficulties, find an important space of personal freedom and autonomy in singlehood.

The cross-analyses of the two surveys agree on the importance of periods of singlehood, yet most studies of emotional and partnership histories gloss over them. The surveys show singlehood to be a fully-fledged socializing experience that calls conjugality into question and shapes the ways people choose to live as couples today.

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Marie BERGSTRÖM, Françoise COURTEL, Géraldine VIVIER • UNCOUPLED: EXPERIENCES OF SINGLEHOOD IN CONTEMPORARY FRANCE

Since the 1970s, the age at first partnership has risen, and separations have become more common. Both men's and women's lives are increasingly punctuated by partnerless periods, first in early adulthood and also later in their relationship histories. In this article, taking an life-course approach and looking at subjective experiences of singlehood, we show that it varies according to age, sex, and social background. Life without a partner seems most burdensome for people in their early 30s, while low-income women say they gain a much-appreciated independence despite their material difficulties. This diversity apart, conjugality rates are high, lifelong singlehood is rare, and couplehood is a powerful social norm that puts great pressure on men and women alike. A cross-analysis of quantitative and qualitative material from the EPIC study of individual and conjugal trajectories (Étude des parcours individuels et conjugaux, INED–INSEE, 2013–2014, France), shows that while separations are more common and forms of couplehood more varied, the social norm of being in a couple has strengthened rather than weakened over time.

Marie BERGSTRÖM, Françoise COURTEL, Géraldine VIVIER • LA VIE HORS COUPLE, UNE VIE HORS NORME? EXPÉRIENCES DU CÉLIBAT DANS LA FRANCE CONTEMPORAINE

Depuis les années 1970, avec le recul de l'âge à la mise en couple et, plus encore, l'augmentation des séparations, les périodes de vie « hors couple » jalonnent de plus en plus les trajectoires des hommes et des femmes, au début de la vie adulte, d'abord, puis au fil du parcours affectif. En abordant ces épisodes de célibat dans une perspective biographique, et en s'intéressant à leur vécu subjectif, cet article met au jour des expériences contrastées selon l'âge, le sexe et le milieu social. La vie célibataire paraît plus pesante aux jeunes trentenaires, alors que les femmes de milieux modestes disent y gagner une indépendance appréciée, malgré les difficultés matérielles. Au-delà de cette diversité, le contexte français reste marqué par un niveau de conjugalité élevé – le célibat définitif est rare – et par une norme de vie à deux très prégnante, dont la pression s'exerce sur toutes et tous. L'analyse croisée de matériaux quantitatifs et qualitatifs tirés de l'enquête Étude des parcours individuels et conjugaux (Épic, Ined-Insee, 2013-2014, France) montre que les séparations et la diversification des manières de faire couple s'accompagnent d'un renforcement, et non d'un affaiblissement, de la norme conjugale.

Marie BERGSTRÖM, Françoise COURTEL, Géraldine VIVIER • ¿LA VIDA SIN PAREJA, UNA VIDA FUERA DE NORMAS? EXPERIENCIAS DE LA SOLTERÍA EN LA FRANCIA CONTEMPORÁNEA

Desde los años 1970, con el retraso de la edad a la formación de la pareja y, más todavía, el aumento de las separaciones, los periodos de la vida "sin pareja" marcan cada vez más las trayectorias de los hombres y de las mujeres al comienzo de la vida adulta primero y, más tarde, a lo largo del itinerario afectivo. Abordando estos periodos de soltería en una perspectiva biográfica e interesándonos a su vivencia subjetiva, este artículo pone en evidencia las experiencias contrastadas según la edad, el sexo y el medio social. La vida de soltero parece más difícil a sobrellevar para los jóvenes treintañeros mientras que las mujeres de condición modesta dicen ganar una independencia apreciable a pesar de las dificultades materiales. Más allá de esta diversidad, el contexto francés queda marcado por un nivel de conjugalidad elevado – la soltería definitiva es rara – y por una norma de la vida en pareja determinante, cuya presión se ejerce sobre todas y sobre todos. El análisis cruzado de materiales cuantitativos y cualitativos provenientes de la encuesta EPIC Estudio de las trayectorias individuales y conyugales (Étude des parcours individuels et conjugaux, Ined-Insee, 2013-2014, Francia) muestra que las separaciones y la diversificación de las maneras de constituir una pareja se acompañan de un refuerzo y no de un aflojamiento de la norma conyugal.

Keywords: EPIC, singlehood, unpartnered, conjugality, couplehood, norm, relationship history, gender, multi-method approach

Translated by Harriet Coleman

