

Toward a Psychology of Singlehood: An Attachment-Theory Perspective on Long-Term Singlehood

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Abstract

The number of people who remain single for long periods of time is sizeable and growing in the Western world, yet they are largely ignored in psychological theory and research. In this article, we review psychological and sociological evidence that long-term singles are a heterogeneous group of individuals, outline an attachment-theoretical model of long-term singlehood, and review direct and indirect empirical evidence suggestive of at least three distinct subgroups of long-term singles: (a) singlehood due to attachment-system deactivation, (b) singlehood due to attachment-system hyperactivation, and (c) singlehood as a secure personal choice. Our aim is to highlight long-term singles as a population that merits scientific study and to provide a foundation on which future research can build.

Keywords

attachment, couples, relationships, singlehood

The need to belong is fundamental (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and the desire for romantic love is so pervasive across cultures that it may serve an evolutionary function (Fletcher, Simpson, Campbell, & Overall, 2015). Much is known about predictors of satisfying couple relationships (Simpson & Campbell, 2013), but less is known about why some people remain single. In this article, we review the psychological and sociological literature pertaining to long-term singlehood, present evidence that long-term singles are a heterogeneous group of individuals, and outline the relevance of attachment theory for understanding long-term singlehood.

Rates of singlehood are increasing rapidly in the Western world. In 1970, about 28% of the U.S. adult population was single (divorced, widowed, or never married); by 2010, this figure had risen to almost 44%. A proportion of this increase can be attributed to cohabitation outside of marriage; however, this accounts for a relatively small proportion of those classified as single, and more people are now living alone than at any other point in history (U.S. Census Bureau, 1970, 2011, 2017). We argue this is a population worthy of scientific study, especially given the dramatic rise in singlehood and the benefits of satisfying relationships (Robles, Slatcher, Trombello & McGinn, 2014). In the

United States, married people report higher life satisfaction than do those who have never married (Lucas & Dyrenforth, 2005), whereas long-term singles report more depression and anxiety than do partnered individuals (Schachner, Shaver, & Gillath, 2008). Note that the benefits of relationships apply to satisfying relationships; distressed couples consistently display maladaptive outcomes (Simpson & Campbell, 2013). Fortunately, much research has investigated methods to enhance couple functioning, yet research has largely ignored the question of why some people remain single for the long term.

Long-Term Singlehood

We use the term *single* to refer to people who are not in a long-term romantic relationship, regardless of legal marital status. Early sociological reviews argued that long-term singles are likely to be a heterogeneous group; for some it may represent a personal choice to remain single, whereas for others it may reflect difficulty

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establishing or maintaining relationships (Keith, 1980; Stein, 1975, 1978). Qualitative research supports this proposition; some report that entering a romantic relationship was not an important goal and that they have chosen to remain single, whereas others attribute being single to having been hurt in previous relationships and to difficulties establishing relationships (Band-Winterstein & Manchik-Rimon, 2014; Forsyth & Johnson, 1995).

Psychological research reveals that single people tend to be higher in attachment insecurity than their partnered counterparts (Chopik, Edelstein, & Fraley, 2013). Schachner et al. (2008) compared partnered adults with adults who had been single for at least 3 years and found that singles reported more difficult relationships with their parents during childhood. Further, although attachment anxiety ($d = 0.26$) and avoidance ($d = 0.23$) were somewhat higher in the group of long-term singles (small effect-size differences), these differences were not statistically significant. Ringstad and Pepping (2016) found that people who were long-term singles (single for at least 3 years) were higher in attachment anxiety ($d = 0.32$; small effect size) and avoidance ($d = 1.01$; large effect size) compared with their coupled counterparts. Adamczyk and Bookwala (2013) compared people who had been single for at least 6 months with partnered individuals and found that singles reported higher attachment insecurity ($d = 0.32$ – 0.62 ; small to moderate effect size); attachment predicted group membership (single vs. partnered).

Each of these studies found that singles were at least somewhat higher in attachment insecurity than their coupled counterparts. However, there are discrepancies between studies regarding the specific dimensions of attachment that predict singlehood and the strength of these associations. We argue that long-term singles are a heterogeneous group, and the available evidence supports this proposition (Forsyth & Johnson, 1995; Band-Winterstein & Manchik-Rimon, 2014). Specifically, there are likely to be multiple pathways to long-term singlehood. For some, it may reflect anxiety about relationships (attachment anxiety) or discomfort with closeness (attachment avoidance). For others, singlehood may be a secure personal choice whereby attachment needs are met outside of romantic relationships. This heterogeneity may help explain inconsistencies in the literature if, for example, certain recruitment methods are biased toward tapping particular subgroups of singles.

Attachment Theory and Long-Term Singlehood

According to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), humans have a biologically evolved attachment behavioral system that motivates infants to maintain proximity to supportive others (attachment figures). Individual differences in

attachment-system functioning arise in response to an individual's social experiences, most commonly with early caregivers. When caregivers are sensitive and responsive, infants develop a secure attachment style and experience feelings of security and confidence that attachment figures will be available when called on. Inconsistent responsiveness results in *hyperactivation* of the attachment system, and proximity-seeking behaviors are intensified. Attachment-system *deactivation*, characterized by suppression of attachment needs and decreased proximity seeking, results from unavailable and rejecting caregivers (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

Hazan and Shaver (1987) conceptualized adult romantic relationships as an attachment process. Adult attachment anxiety (hyperactivation) is characterized by heightened sensitivity to rejection and abandonment, fear that support will not be provided, and anger and distress when attachment needs are frustrated. In contrast, attachment avoidance (deactivation) is characterized by suppression of the attachment system, discomfort with intimacy and closeness, and excessive self-reliance. Individuals low in attachment anxiety and avoidance have an internal working model of attachment security (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

Much evidence reveals that attachment security is protective in romantic relationships, whereas attachment insecurity undermines relationship functioning and predicts relational instability (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012). According to some research, attachment security has decreased in recent years, and attachment insecurity has increased (Konrath, Chopik, Hsing, & O'Brien, 2014). Attachment processes may therefore be implicated in the dramatic increase in singlehood. However, if singles are a heterogeneous group, simply comparing singles with partnered individuals on dimensions of attachment is unlikely to fully capture the diverse nature of this population. In this article, we outline how specific attachment orientations are associated with unique constellations of cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes that may differentially predict reasons for long-term singlehood (See Table 1).

Attachment-System Deactivation and Long-Term Singlehood

Attachment-system deactivation is associated with cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes that undermine the potential for intimacy. The primary goal of avoidant attachment is to maintain attachment-system deactivation to avert vulnerability associated with intimacy (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2009). Avoidant individuals hold expectations of relationship failure (Birnie, McClure, Lydon, & Holmberg, 2009), expect to be hurt in relationships (Baldwin, Fehr, Keedian, Seidel, & Thomson, 1993), and avoid situations that might activate

Table 1. Summary of Cognitive, Affective, and Behavioral Processes Associated With Attachment-System Hyperactivation and Deactivation

Relationship cognition	Emotion, intimacy, and support	Behavioral processes
Attachment deactivation		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report not believing in love • View partners as untrustworthy • Expect relationship failure and being hurt • Have low romantic interest when interacting with potential partners • Perceive low opportunity for intimacy • Have low commitment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deactivate and inhibit emotional experience and expression • Experience and express less gratitude and appreciation of partners • Seek support less often and provide poor caregiving • Are less likely to seek intimacy and look for new relationship after break-up • Have emotionless, uncommitted sex and less frequent sex • Increase use of solitary sexual activities (e.g., masturbation) • Are less likely to enter into a committed romantic relationship 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have less frequent interaction with others and spend more time alone • Have low levels of self-disclosure and less socially skilled • Show few nonverbal displays of intimacy and affection • Use less physical touch and experience discomfort with touch from others • Sit farther away from potential romantic partners • Express low interest in potential partners • Underestimate partner desire for intimacy • Have a self-presentation style that is overly positive and self-sufficient
Attachment hyperactivation		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strongly desire intimacy, but have little faith partners will reciprocate • Experience love as a form of obsession, but rarely find love that fits their expectations • Perceive themselves as unlovable • Are hypervigilant to threat-related cues in relationships • Have negative and volatile perceptions of relationships and partners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experience heightened emotionality and difficulty regulating emotion • Seek proximity to regulate emotion but have little satisfaction with support they receive • Worry constantly about rejection, abandonment, and disapproval • Have heightened sensitivity to hurt feelings in relationships • Experience jealousy, low trust, and suspiciousness of partners • Ruminates and perseverate over prior relationships • Have a desire for sex to enhance intimacy, which leads to being less discriminating and having more risky sex and unwanted sex 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behave in a helpless, needy manner and are prone to excessive reassurance seeking • Have less topical reciprocity when interacting with others • Show excessive clinginess • Are angry and hostile during conflict • Display obvious anxiety, verbal disfluencies, and interpersonal awkwardness • Potential partners perceive behaviors negatively

Note: For reviews of the topics in the table, see Collins and Feeney (2004) and Mikulincer and Shaver (2012, 2016).

vulnerable emotions (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2009). Accordingly, they perceive low opportunity for romantic connection and report reduced romantic interest, especially when there is a potential for connection (Spielmann, Maxwell, MacDonald, & Baratta, 2013). Thus, avoidant individuals keep their hopes for intimacy low when there is an opportunity for connection in order to circumvent attachment-system activation and to prevent potential distress and disappointment. These features may be particularly detrimental during the relationship-formation stage.

The interpersonal style of avoidant individuals is characterized by a reluctance to get close to others and serves to maintain emotional distance. People high in attachment avoidance display less nonverbal intimacy, affection, and expressiveness during interactions (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016), and use less self-disclosure

(Mikulincer & Nachshon, 1991). Guerrero (1996) found that people high in attachment avoidance sat farthest away from partners during interactions and displayed lower receptivity, less gaze and vocal pleasantness, and reduced interest and attentiveness in conversations, compared with secure people. In couples, avoidant women seek less support from partners during times of stress, and avoidant men provide less support to their partners when partner distress increases (Simpson, Rholes, & Nelligan, 1992). Attachment avoidance is associated with more positive attitudes toward emotionless, uncommitted sex and with increased frequency of masturbation, a solitary activity that is consistent with the deactivating strategy of self-reliance (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Further, they are less likely to form a committed relationship (Schindler, Fagundes, & Murdock, 2010) and more likely to avoid new relationships after

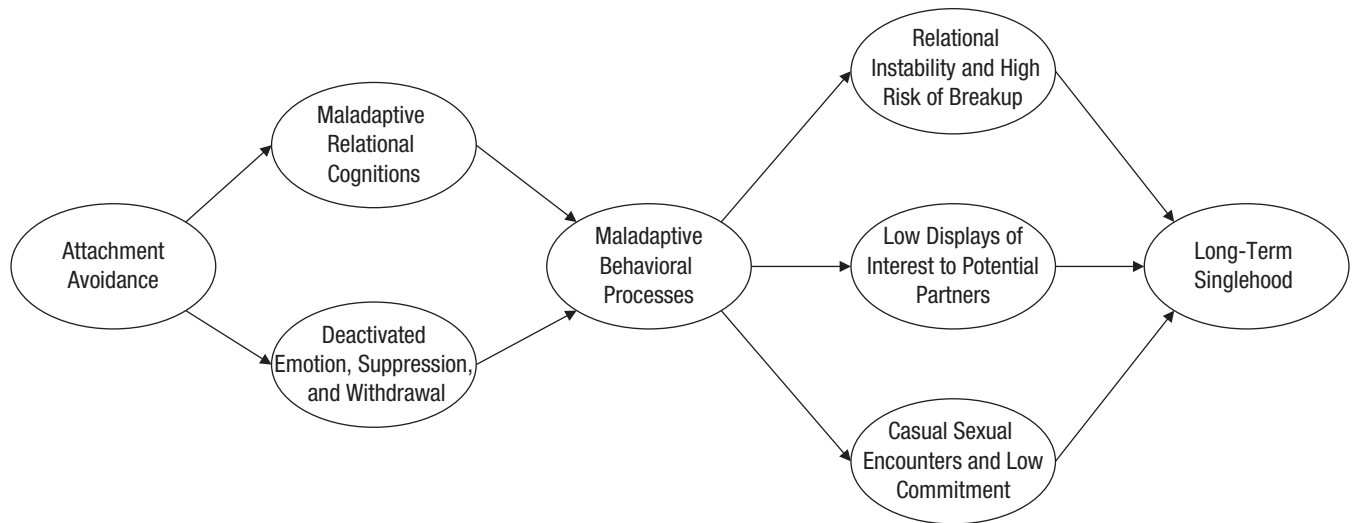


Fig. 1. Model of attachment-system deactivation and long-term singlehood. The diagram shows how attachment avoidance leads to maladaptive relational cognitions and deactivated emotion, which lead to maladaptive behaviors (e.g., withdrawal, avoidance) that predict relational instability and high risk of break-up, low displays of interest to potential partners, and casual sexual encounters and low commitment. These, in turn, predict long-term singlehood.

break-up (Davis, Shaver, & Vernon, 2003). Although it may appear that they do not desire intimacy, much evidence reveals they do have intimacy needs, but these are defensively inhibited to avoid disappointment and pain (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2009).

In brief, the cognitive and affective processes associated with avoidant attachment give rise to maladaptive behavioral processes associated with (a) relational instability, (b) lack of interest in potential partners, and (c) engagement in casual, uncommitted sex (see Fig. 1). One distinct subgroup of long-term singles is therefore likely to be characterized by attachment-system deactivation. Given that attachment orientations are pervasive, avoidant singles are unlikely to get their intimacy needs met in nonromantic relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012), which is associated with poorer psychosocial adjustment (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Some individuals report being single because they are dedicated to their careers (Forsyth & Johnson, 1995), and avoidant individuals are often successful and satisfied in careers characterized by self-reliance and autonomy (Ein-Dor, Reizer, Shaver, & Dotan, 2012). Research is needed to investigate whether career success buffers the negative effects of avoidance on well-being among long-term singles.

Attachment-System Hyperactivation and Long-Term Singlehood

Attachment-system hyperactivation is associated with cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes that undermine relationship development and maintenance (Table 1). A tension exists for people with high attachment

anxiety; they seek proximity and closeness to romantic partners but also hold negative expectations of partners and do not trust that their efforts to gain proximity will be reciprocated (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). These information-processing biases give rise to distinct patterns of emotion and behavior that undermine relationships. For instance, attachment anxiety is associated with heightened jealousy and low trust of partners, as well as poor communication and poor conflict-resolution skills (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). Such people are also more likely to persevere and maintain emotional attachments to ex-partners (Davis et al., 2003), which is shown to predict future relationship instability (Spielmann, Joel, MacDonald, & Kogan, 2013). Highly anxious individuals are less discriminating in their sexual partners, more willing to engage in risky sex, and more likely to engage in brief, unstable relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016).

When interacting with potential relationship partners, anxious individuals display high interpersonal receptivity, interest, and attentiveness, which is consistent with their desire to enhance intimacy (Guerrero, 1996); however, they also exhibit behaviors that undermine the quality of these interactions. For instance, they display less topical reciprocity (i.e., the degree to which their responses to communication concern the same subject matter) and are prone to excessive reassurance seeking and clinging behavior (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2016). During conflict, they experience heightened distress and tend to escalate the conflict readily (Campbell, Simpson, Boldry, & Kashy, 2005). Accordingly, individuals with high attachment anxiety are rated as less attractive by potential partners during speed dating and are

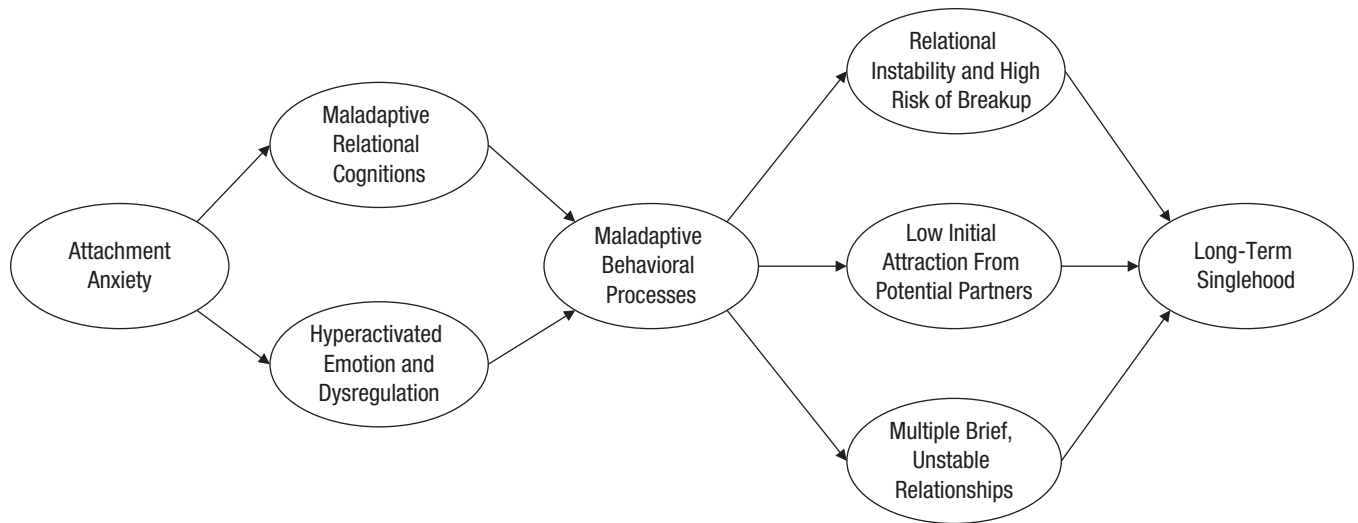


Fig. 2. Model of attachment-system hyperactivation and long-term singlehood. The diagram shows how attachment anxiety leads to maladaptive relational cognitions and hyperactivated emotion, which lead to maladaptive behaviors (e.g., less topical reciprocity, excessive reassurance seeking) that predict relational instability and high risk of break-up, low initial attraction from potential partners, and multiple brief, unstable relationships. These, in turn, predict long-term singlehood.

rated as less interpersonally appealing by trained observers. These effects are mediated by signs of manifest anxiety, verbal disfluencies, and interpersonal awkwardness (McClure & Lydon, 2014).

In brief, despite a strong desire for connection, their intense fears of abandonment result in behaviors that undermine interpersonal success and are associated with (a) relational instability and high risk of breakup, (b) less romantic interest from potential partners, and (c) being less discriminating about potential partners, engaging in a series of brief, unstable relationships (see Fig. 2). Consistent with the developmental history of attachment anxiety, this group of singles is likely to put great effort into finding relationship partners and to feel dejected and disappointed in the unavailability of romantic love (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Likewise, they report more fear of being single (Spielmann, MacDonald, et al., 2013), and dissatisfaction with single status predicts poor well-being (Lehmann et al., 2015). Thus, a second distinct subgroup of long-term singles may be characterized by attachment-system hyperactivation, and this is likely associated with poor psychosocial adjustment.

Singlehood as a Satisfying Personal Choice

For some, long-term singlehood may not reflect difficulties in relationships but may instead be a secure personal choice whereby attachment needs are met in relationships other than romantic pair-bonds. Individuals form attachments to people other than romantic

partners, and these relationships can successfully meet attachment needs (Doherty & Feeney, 2004; Fraley, Heffernan, Vicary, & Brumbaugh, 2011). The possibility that some people choose to remain single, and are satisfied with this choice, has been raised by several researchers (e.g., DePaulo, 2014; Schachner et al., 2008), and empirical research supports this proposition (Band-Winterstein & Manchik-Rimon, 2014; Forsyth & Johnson, 1995).

There are likely to be individual differences in the extent to which remaining single is a choice and whether people are satisfied with this choice. A qualitative study found two general pathways into singlehood (Timonen & Doyle, 2014). *Chosen singlehood* was associated with satisfaction with single status, self-fulfillment, and personal autonomy, whereas *constrained singlehood*, or involuntary singlehood, was associated with regret and dissatisfaction with single status. This distinction was also observed in recent quantitative research: Satisfaction with single status predicted higher life satisfaction and less distress compared with people who were not satisfied with singlehood (Lehmann et al., 2015). Why, then, do some choose to remain single? Research suggests the reasons vary widely, from preferring to focus on one's career, spiritual or religious reasons, to a personal preference for solitude and alone time (Band-Winterstein & Manchik-Rimon, 2014; Forsyth & Johnson, 1995; Timonen & Doyle, 2014). However, what appears to be most critical is the extent to which singlehood reflects a personal choice rather than underlying difficulties in relationships (Forsyth & Johnson, 1995; Lehmann et al., 2015).

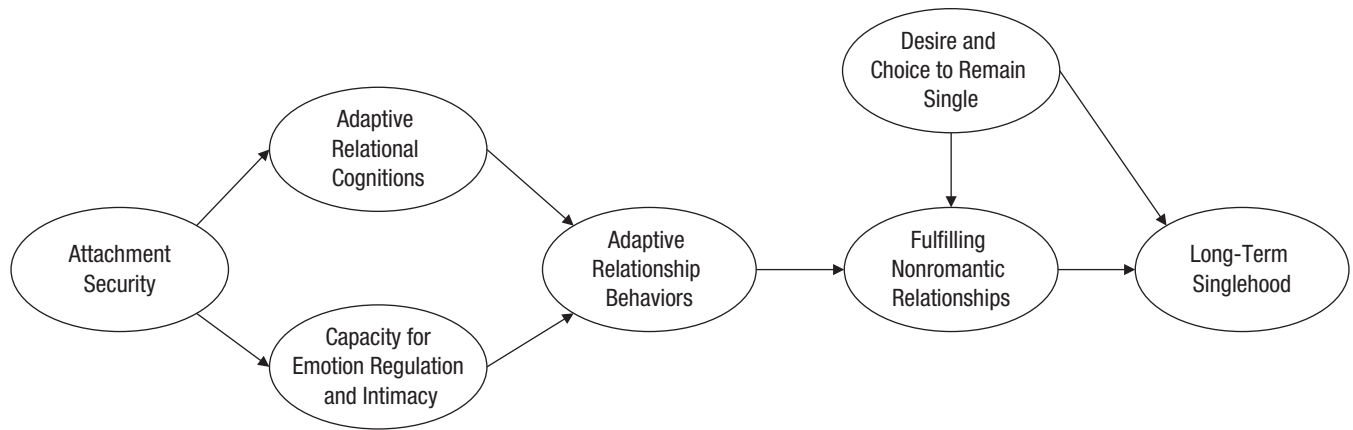


Fig. 3. Model of attachment security and long-term singlehood. The diagram shows the process through which attachment security leads to long-term singlehood, as well as the role of fulfilling nonromantic relationships.

The extent to which attachment needs are met in relationships other than pair-bonds is also relevant. Choosing to remain single does not negate the need for close relationships. Spielmann, MacDonald, et al. (2013) found that the most frequently cited reason for comfort with singlehood was having meaningful close relationships with friends and family. Thus, the extent to which one has close relationships with others also appears to influence satisfaction with singlehood, and we suggest this is a core feature of singlehood reflecting a satisfying personal choice. Note that this is distinct from the defensive denial of intimacy needs that is characteristic of avoidant attachment, which is pervasive and also undermines nonromantic relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012).

What percentage of long-term singles are single by choice? The available evidence suggests that this group may be reasonably small: Only 13.2% (Lehmann et al., 2015) and 11% (Forsyth & Johnson, 1995) of singles report not wishing to be in a relationship or not wishing to marry, respectively. Thus, the finding that singles, on average, display poorer outcomes compared with their coupled counterparts (Schachner et al., 2008) may not be particularly surprising if less than 15% of singles report a desire to remain single. In summary, for some, singlehood may reflect a satisfying personal choice associated with attachment security, provided that (a) singlehood was indeed their choice (Lehmann et al., 2015) and (b) they effectively get attachment needs met in relationships other than romantic pair-bonds (Spielmann, MacDonald, et al., 2013; see Fig. 3). This group is therefore likely to display positive psychosocial well-being.

Concluding Comments

We have reviewed evidence suggestive of at least three distinct subgroups of long-term singles that are likely

to be differentially associated with life outcomes. Research is needed to investigate the conditions under which attachment predicts singlehood and the psychological outcomes for the three subgroups. Note that *attachment disorganization*, characterized by significant fear and contradictory behaviors in relationships, may coexist with attachment anxiety or avoidance. Such individuals display chaotic, contradictory, or confused behaviors in relationships, such as proximity seeking coupled with apprehension or distancing from others (Paetzold, Rholes, & Kohn, 2015). These disorganized behaviors may often be observed only briefly, with the individual typically relying on their organized (hyperactivating or deactivating) attachment strategy. Disorganized patterns are highly likely to undermine relationships, and it is possible that an additional subgroup of singles may be characterized by attachment disorganization. Further research is needed to investigate relationship patterns associated with disorganization using recently developed scales tapping disorganized attachment (Paetzold et al., 2015).

There have been major social changes in recent years, including increased access to reproductive technologies, greater acceptance of casual sex, and less economic need for women to be in a committed relationship. These factors are likely to also be involved in the rise in singlehood, particularly among the single-by-choice group. We have outlined evidence suggestive of at least three subgroups of long-term singles, a perspective that provides a promising starting place for making sense of the mixed evidence on attachment and long-term singlehood.

Recommended Reading

DePaulo, B. (2014). (See References). An excellent overview of research pertaining to singlehood, largely from the perspective of singlehood as a satisfying personal choice.

- Fletcher, G. J., Simpson, J. A., Campbell, L., & Overall, N. C. (2015). (See References). A useful overview of theory and research highlighting that pair-bonding and romantic love may serve an evolutionary function; also includes research pertaining to attachment theory and romantic love.
- Hazan, C., & Shaver, P. (1987). (See References). A classic article that originally outlined how adult romantic relationships may be conceptualized from an attachment-theoretical perspective.
- Mikulincer, M., & Shaver, P. R. (2012). (See References). A useful review of the empirical research pertaining to adult attachment and relationship processes, including factors that contribute to positive relationships and processes that undermine relationship functioning.
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