

Chapter 1

BEING SINGLE ON NOAH'S ARK

Singles in the World of the Married

THE VALUES SYSTEM

America is a society of contradictory values. On the one hand, we regard highly the values of individualism, of being unique in thoughts and actions, of using Yankee ingenuity and inventiveness. These values have long been considered the cornerstone for America's development and are summed up in our emphasis on competition and on being different.

On the other hand, no society can function without a norm of conformity. There are times when it becomes necessary for individuals to subsume their personal needs and desires for the higher goal of the group, the organization, and the community. As we have become an organizational society in the twentieth century, there has been more need for cooperation and less scope for individual adventure and initiative.

Thus, we teach and value individual initiative, but learn in everyday society that individuality carried beyond very moderate limits can incur serious penalties. This contradiction is felt most strongly by minority populations. Among these minorities are not only racial and ethnic groups, but also groups that had not been perceived until recently as minorities: the poor, the handicapped, and the unmarried (O'Brien, 1973: 51).

Marriage is seen as instrumental in fulfilling such societal needs as socializing the infant into a person with human qualities, providing for our personal needs of affection and security, and maintaining life itself (Nye, 1967: 248). Despite the loss of many functions in regard to work, protective, educational, and

recreational practices, the family is still seen as the provider of psychic well-being and as the "matrix for the development of personality" (Ackerman, 1972: 16). In addition, the things that people are seeking in marriage are among the best we need and want, and they are those things for which we have no reliable substitutes: love, stability, and loyalty (O'Brien, 1973: 51). Thus the state of marriage is thought of as the natural order of things, and those who do not conform threaten this order; the result is that there is little room in the system for the unaccompanied person (Duberman, 1977: 115).

STEREOTYPES ABOUT SINGLES

Such perceptions have led to the development of beliefs designed to perpetuate the dominance of pairs, beliefs in which marriage is seen as the positive choice, as something good; singleness implies the opposite idea, of a negative choice, a bad state (Deegan, 1969: 9). The single person is often perceived as one who, lacking a partner, is alone and not complete, "who is moving against the grain of the powerful norms defining marriage as the most desirable state adults can attain," and who comes to be seen as "unfit and deviant" (Bell, 1972: 89).

When students of marriage consider the possible reasons for not marrying (or, as they often put it, "failing" to marry), the reasons they come up with often seem to be negative: People do not marry because they are hostile toward members of the opposite sex or are homosexual; because they are immature, unwilling to assume responsibility, neurotic, or emotionally fixated on a parent; because they are unattractive or unhealthy; because they failed in the dating game, either because they are socially inadequate or because they became fixated on a lost love; because they were overfocused on economics, either perceiving themselves too poor to marry or perceiving marriage as a threat to their careers; because they were just unlucky, isolated by geography, education, or occupation (for instance, illiterate lighthouse keepers); because they were overcome by

some sort of "principled deviance"; or, if none of the above, their failure to marry must have been the result of an oversight! (See Kuhn, 1955: 521; Davis and Strong, 1977: 125.) Such lists "reflect our adherence to the ideal that everyone marry and that . . . anyone can" if they really want to (Duberman, 1977: 118) and omit the possibility that remaining single might have been a rational choice, as well as obscure the realities of singlehood.

In sum, "no matter how often it is called 'a positive, individual state,' the single life as . . . publicly drawn comes to this composite picture: the single is a poseur, a squanderer, a narcissist, a wastrel; he dances the hustle in the apartment house party room; loafers on his plastic sea horse in the . . . swimming pool; lives for lotions, balms and sprays; is a non-stop lover, drinker, laugher, and more (or less)" (Rosenblatt, 1977: 14).

Not surprisingly, the stereotype of the deviant single applies more to women than to men since it is women who are "saved" by marriage in an economy dominated by males. Thus, in an examination of single women as portrayed in literary fiction, Deegan (1969: 3) found that the women pictured were unmarried because they are unattractive, handicapped, or incompetent. Since marriage is the important factor, they are creatures pitied or ridiculed rather than admired, despite the fact that they are generally pictured as admirable people (Deegan, 1969: 111-112).

O'Brien (1973: 74) adds to this contradictory view of the single woman in America by noting that she is usually pitied, disliked, or ascribed a low status except when she is needed — in times of war, to nurse the wounded or to run the farms and factories. While the young single woman may be challenging and intriguing, prolonged singleness, like prolonged virginity, is suspect. At some point she becomes a spinster or an old maid. The terms have become archaic, but their meaning persists. It appears that it is difficult to believe that women are single because they do not want to be wives. Thus the "experts" tell us that women can only find love and sexual fulfillment within

the bonds of matrimony, and so it is important for them to marry or remarry lest they face emotional and physical deterioration (Edwards and Hoover, 1974: 17).

No wonder Dorothy Parker was led to conclude:

Men in single state should tarry,
While women, I suggest, should marry.

But, Dorothy Parker notwithstanding, men have not entirely escaped social reprobation for bachelorhood. Singlehood for men has often suggested alcoholism, homosexuality, personality inadequacy, or psychopathology (Libby, 1978: 163). Even if they participate in the social mainstream, they may be pictured as workaholics or, if their enterprises are theological, as religious fanatics or recluses (Carter and Glick, 1970: 229). A contrary image, that of the Joe Namath kind of swinging single, nevertheless carries with it overtones of immaturity, selfishness, lechery, and social irresponsibility (Libby, 1978: 165; Stein, 1976: 2).

The stereotypes cited here are much entangled, some overlapping, some contradictory. It is worth pausing to try to sort them out, and to hear the reply of those being condemned: the singles.

Deviance. The stereotype is that singles are somehow abnormal. Marriage is a normal process and, at least between certain ages, a person normally should be married. The singles community tends to reply that, like the decision to marry, singlehood is a normal choice, and that the percentage of singles has grown so that among adults it constitutes a very substantial minority, which, if it keeps growing, may constitute a majority before very long. The very size of this group belies the claim of its deviancy.

Immaturity. Since marriage is a normal stage of development, the "failure" to marry or to remain married reflects some kind of immaturity. If a man, he may be tied to his mother's apron strings; if a woman, a spinster who has not experienced life. It may be that the single person has not reached the state of altruism, that he or she is selfish and unable to share. The singles community points to many singles who are obviously

mature, experienced, and selfless, be it an Isaac Newton in the past or a current Ralph Nader.

Sexual deviance. Conjugal sexuality is normal. How does the single meet sexual needs? Either by swinging, a lecherous hopping from bed to bed; by sexual inversion, which is perceived as a developmental failure; by abstinence, which is unnatural; or by masturbation, which again is selfish. Often ignored is the fact that what is considered to be sexual deviance has been found to be extensive among both marrieds and singles (Kinsey, 1948; Hunt, 1974).

Freedom. The single is perceived ambiguously as freer than the married person, as having more time, since he or she is not burdened with family and children. For this reason, however, the single is also perceived to be less responsible, a swinger concerned only with having fun and looking after his or her own interests, a person lacking community ties and responsibilities; again, an immature and irresponsible person. (These separations for clarification inevitably call to be reconnected with other aspects of the situation.) Singles respond that since they have to do both housework and office work, they have less time than the married, but still assume their share of social responsibility.

Happiness and loneliness. Here we have a mixed set of stereotypes. On one hand the single is pictured as having more fun, getting out more, having more freedom to make choices, and having fewer worries; therefore, it would seem that the single ought to be happier than the nonsingle. On the other hand, the single is perceived as living alone, always having to initiate social relationships, and having no permanent person with whom to share; therefore the single is more lonely, and if more lonely, unhappier. Singles tend to respond that they share similar life problems with the married, and so are probably neither happier nor having more fun than marrieds. As for loneliness, they point out that many single people live with others, that many singles as well as marrieds do not depend on housemates for social needs, and that many marrieds are lonely, too. Other singles grant that loneliness is a problem, but one they are willing to confront in exchange for the advantages of being single.

Affluence. Since singles do not have children, and children cost tens of thousands of dollars each in this world, it is obvious that singles must be richer than marrieds. And singles seem to live from trip to trip — they are always taking vacations. They live in well-furnished apartments or condominiums, usually with a decorative woman or man spending the night, drinking French wine and listening to the stereo. Singles respond to this one with hoots and laughter, pointing out that either they do not have children, in which case they pay terrific taxes and are discriminated against by family economy sizes, or they have children, in which case they have to raise them by themselves on one income, with baby-sitter fees besides.

Workaholicism. Since they do not have families, singles devote themselves to their careers with fanatical intensity that the married person, who has divided responsibilities, cannot match. The result is that they get the top positions in their organizations. If the top people are married, they are likely to get divorces anyway, either because they are married to their work or because they can afford it. Singles respond that there are some singles like that, as there are some marrieds (who may, indeed, be candidates for serial marriage), but there are also many charming singles who take their work in normal proportion to their lives, taking ample time for their friends and their hobbies. Besides, the married are the ones who get the promotions, since they are seen as more mature, restrained, and responsible.

Given these beliefs, it is not surprising that we are taught early in the socialization process that to be truly happy and fulfilled, it is necessary to become married and take on the responsibilities of a family. Marriage, then, is the social norm, and remaining unmarried or choosing against marriage leads to negative stereotypes, biases, and discriminations.

The world throughout history goes marching two by two. From Noah's Ark to the socialization process of today's society, two is the proper number, and in a world that counts by twos, the pressure to marry has been overwhelming.

STOP

THE GROWING SINGLES POPULATION

We have referred, in commenting on responses to stereotypes, to a singles community. Such a community exists in that there is a growing number of singles who are aware of themselves as such. They are attempting to transmit this awareness to a much larger category, who perceive of themselves as widowed, divorced, planning to remarry, planning to marry, or being unmarried and having no immediate plans for being married. Members of this category do not readily identify with one another. A college junior involved in the dating game would not be expected to see herself as linked in any community with her divorced uncle and widowed grandmother. But if she marries next year, she will more readily perceive, at least on a family occasion, that she, like her mother and grandmother, is a married woman. The word single, then, is becoming a label for a large and divergent category of people as a means of treating them on the basis of their one common characteristic — their nonmarriage status. It is a term coming into wide use as a replacement for the words spinster or bachelor, and applied to all who find themselves in this nonmarriage state, regardless of the reason — the never married, the divorced, the widowed.

Whatever the social pressures, it is clear that singles have been growing as a percentage of the population in America. The figures reveal that since 1960 there has been a marked increase of single households with a resultant decline in the nuclear family. Between 1960 and 1975, the number of adults between the ages of 20 and 34 who have never been married increased by 50 percent, while in the same period the divorce rate doubled. The number of people under 25 living alone has tripled in 7 years (1970-1977). The large increase in divorce is emphasized when it is noted that 39 percent of first marriages now end in divorce within 10 years, and 59 percent of second marriages end so within 5 years. In addition, the time interval between divorce and remarriage has increased and so the number of those divorced but not remarried doubled in the decade from 1963 to