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Targets

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**STEREOTYPES OF SINGLE PERSONS:  
PERCEPTIONS OF SINGLE VERSUS MARRIED TARGETS**

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## Abstract

Single persons comprise a sizable and growing proportion of the US population. However, surprisingly little psychological research has been conducted regarding single persons as compared to the quantity of research conducted regarding married persons. Prior research regarding perceptions of single persons indicates that single persons are perceived more negatively than married persons (e.g., Etaugh & Malstrom, 1981). In the present study, 265 undergraduates (61.1% male, mean age 19.5) read brief descriptions of hypothetical persons whose marital status and gender were varied. Participants generated lists of characteristics they perceived to describe these target persons. A coding system was developed and used to evaluate all characteristics as positive, negative, or neutral. As predicted, results indicate that single targets were perceived more negatively than were married targets. However, this finding only held true for male participants. Also as predicted, male participants viewed single persons more negatively than female participants.



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## Stereotypes of Single Persons: Perceptions of Single versus Married Targets

The number of unmarried adults (18 or older) in the United States increased from 38 million in 1970 to 82 million in 2000 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001b). Single adults comprised 28.3 percent of the adult population in 1970, while they comprised 40.4 percent of the adult population in 2000 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001b). The United States Census Bureau (1998) estimates that in the year 2010, 47.2 percent of the adult population will be single. In addition, over the past 30 years, the percentage of U.S. households described as “single person households” increased from 17% to 26% (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2001a). Clearly, single adults comprise a sizable and growing proportion of the U.S. population. Despite the large and increasing number of single persons in the U.S. population, surprisingly little empirical research has been conducted regarding single persons as compared to the quantity of research conducted regarding married persons. Much of the existing research that has been conducted focuses on how singles locate partners. The limited number of empirical studies regarding single persons may be interpreted as a statement about researchers’ attitude toward the value of understanding this growing segment of the population. Some social scientists have interpreted the limited research regarding singles as a reflection of the prevailing belief that all persons should marry (Duberman, 1977). The quantity of research regarding single persons might indicate that singlehood is viewed as a deviant or pathological state (Duberman, 1977).

## Single Status in the United States

In colonial America, single persons were viewed negatively, experienced discrimination, and lost personal freedoms (Schwartz & Wolf, 1976). In fact, single persons who had not married by the traditional marriage age typically were required to move in with a family, as they were not trusted to behave in an upright manner living on their own (Schwartz & Wolf, 1976). Women generally moved in with relatives and acted as unpaid assistants or servants to the woman of the house (MacGill, 1910). The pattern of single women taking this role resulted in the term “old maid.” The societal bias towards marriage also can be seen in the colonial policy of providing land incentives to promote marriage and taxing bachelors at a higher rate than married men (Goodsell, 1930).

Veroff, Douvan, and Kulka (1981) conducted a study of attitudes toward singlehood in the years 1957 and 1976. They found that in 1957 individuals who did not marry were thought to be pathological or morally flawed, while in 1976 individuals viewed those who did not marry more positively than they had in 1957. When asked how marriage alters a person’s life, 43% of the participants said positively in 1957 while 30 % said positively in 1976. These findings reflect changes in societal norms regarding the necessity of marriage. Although this study often is quoted as reflecting attitudes toward singlehood, the attitudinal question about single persons asked what the respondent thought about a person that “did not want to get married.” Thus, this shift in attitudes between 1957 and 1976 was actually a shift in attitudes regarding persons who did not desire to marry, not persons who did not marry.

Another study examining attitudes toward singlehood suggested a more favorable view of singlehood. Thornton and Freedman (1982) studied attitudes toward marriage and singlehood in a sample of young adults (18 years old) and their mothers as part of the Study of American Families. The majority of the young adults and their mothers indicated that they did not believe that marriage was better than singlehood. However, the majority of the respondents indicated that they disagreed with the statement that there were more advantages to being single than to being married. The Study of American Families did not follow up with questions targeting the reasons behind the participants' responses.

Unfortunately, no large scale studies of attitudes toward single persons have been conducted in the last 20 years. Because the number of single persons has increased significantly over the past twenty years, it is likely that attitudes toward single persons may have changed over this time frame as well.

Marriage is the societal norm and appears to carry with it preferred status. The United States government recently stated that "it was actively committed to promoting marriage" (Lyall, 2002). Specifically, the US Department of Health and Human Services recently decided to allocate 100 million dollars to promote marriage and provide pre-marital and marital counseling, primarily to poor teenagers (Vulliamy, 2002). Evidence suggests that singles do not experience equal treatment in the workplace, obtain fewer job benefits, pay more for insurance, experience credit discrimination, and experience housing discrimination (Coleman, 2003).

While anecdotal evidence indicates that stereotypes of single persons exist today, little empirical research has addressed the question of whether these stereotypes exist and what the stereotypes might consist of if they do exist.

The negative stereotypes that exist about singles can be conceptualized as support for the value our society places on marriage (Turner, 1970). Two prevailing stereotypes of singles are of the “swinging single” and the lonely single. Cargan (1981) examined the veracity of these stereotypes by comparing never-married, divorced, and married persons’ responses to questions related to time spent alone, feelings of loneliness, and sexual activity. Cargan interpreted his findings to indicate that while some never-married persons do endorse more items that reflect loneliness, most never-married persons do not. Divorced participants endorsed more items reflecting high levels of loneliness than never-married participants. Although the findings indicated that never-married persons have had more sexual partners than married persons, less than 20 percent of the never-married persons in the sample had a large number of sexual partners. One third of the divorced persons in Cargan’s sample reported that they had 11 or more sexual partners. This percentage is significantly greater than the percentage of never-married (15%) and married persons (6%) who reported that they had 11 or more sexual partners. As this study is more than 20 years old, it is unclear whether these patterns of results would still hold true today.

#### Research Findings Regarding Single Persons

As with all stereotypes and perceptions of a social category, it is important to know what part of the perception or stereotype may be grounded in the actual characteristics of the group. Thus, it is important to review the research findings about

single persons, particularly as compared to married persons. Although this research is limited, researchers have studied how singlehood relates to factors such as loneliness (Cargan, 1981; Dykstra, 1995), happiness (Bernard, 1972; Glenn & Weaver, 1988; Lee, Seccombe, & Shehan, 1991), depression (Pearlin & Johnson, 1977; Radloff, 1975), and psychological well-being (Mookherjee, 1997; Wayment & Peplau, 1995). In addition, social scientists have examined how single persons experience the single state (Lewis & Moon, 1997; Stein, 1975).

One commonly held perception of single persons is that they are lonely. Research indicates that loneliness is most prevalent among divorced persons as compared to individuals of other marital status groups (Cargan, 1981). Never-married individuals report moderate levels of loneliness as compared to divorced persons, who report greater levels of loneliness, and married persons, who report lower levels of loneliness (Cargan, 1981). However, Dykstra (1995) found that the absence of friendship support appeared to influence loneliness more in older adults than did marital status. Burnley and Kurth (1992) reported that “marital status is not necessarily an appropriate independent variable in assessing loneliness,” (p. 57) because being alone and loneliness are distinct constructs.

Several studies have investigated the relationship between marital status and psychological well-being. Johnston and Ecklund (1984) reviewed these studies and found that in five of the ten reviewed studies married persons were significantly more well-adjusted than unmarried persons. In three of the reviewed studies, never-married individuals were found to be more well-adjusted, while in two of the studies, no significant differences were found in adjustment between married and never-married

individuals. When the women and men were considered separately, it was found that married men tended to be more well-adjusted than never-married men, while never-married women were found to be as well-adjusted or better adjusted than were married women (Johnston and Ecklund, 1984). Wayment and Peplau (1995) found that coupled women, whether married or unmarried, experienced greater levels of psychological well-being and that individuals' perceptions of the amount of their social support were strongly related to well-being. Mookherjee (1997) found that married men and women reported greater levels of well-being than did unmarried men and women when race and financial status were controlled for. The lack of consistent findings regarding the impact of marital status on well-being may be due to the lack of a consistent definition of well-being and varying measures of well-being.

One piece of psychological health that has been studied in relation to marital status is depression. Married women tend to experience more depression than married men (Radloff, 1975). However, unmarried men tend to experience more depression than unmarried women (Radloff). Other studies indicate that the formerly married are most likely to experience depression, while the married are least likely to experience depression (Pearlin & Johnson, 1977). Never-married individuals experience depression at a level between that of the formerly married and the married (Pearlin & Johnson). Pearlin and Johnson further explored the relationship between marital status and depression and found that single persons are more likely to be depressed when they encounter social and economic strains in addition to being single.

Bernard's (1972) landmark study regarding the influence of marital status on several outcome variables is often cited as support for the idea that males benefit from

marriage while females do not. Bernard found that men who never married were less happy, more likely to be mentally ill, less healthy, and more likely to commit suicide than married men. Females tended to not gain the same benefits from marriage. One proposed explanation for this difference is that within marriage, males have more rights than women (Davis & Strong, 1976). In addition, unmarried men do not have the support and domestic assistance that married men do (Davis & Strong, 1976). Also, a number of researchers have conceptualized a married man's role as more satisfying and less stressful than a married woman's role (Bernard, 1972; Gove, Briggs Style, & Hughes, 1990; Mookherjee, 1997).

As a result of the societal norm for marriage, marriage is often thought of as bringing with it greater life satisfaction than singlehood. Studies comparing the life satisfaction of never-married, divorced/separated, and married individuals found that married individuals reported greater life satisfaction than those with any other marital status (White, 1992; Yoder & Nichols, 1980). In one study, there was no significant difference in reported life satisfaction between never-married individuals and divorced/separated individuals (Yoder & Nichols, 1980); in another study, divorced persons reported greater levels of life satisfaction than did never-married persons (Frazier et al., 1996).

Stereotypically, singles are often thought of as less happy than married persons. Over the years, researchers have studied the relationship between marital status and happiness. Glenn and Weaver (1988) used General Social Survey data from 1972 to 1986 and found that the difference between the self-reported happiness of married and never-married person decreased from the early 1970's to the mid-1980's. The

researchers explain this result as being the consequence of the increase in happiness of never-married individuals and a decrease in happiness of married individuals. Using the General Social Survey, Lee, Seccombe, and Shehan (1991) found that in 1987 and 1988 the difference in happiness levels between married and never-married individuals returned to the levels of the early 1970's, while in 1989 the difference all but disappeared. Clearly, additional research would help clarify the relationship between happiness and marital status.

While research indicates that there are differences on some variables between married and single persons, it is difficult to determine whether these differences are a result of marital status or a causal factor in whether individuals marry, divorce, or never marry. For example, one study indicated that individuals who report greater well-being were more likely to marry (Mastekaasa, 1992). Marks (1996) found that "selection does not account for marital status differences in well-being" (p.917).

Singles are conceptualized as either being isolated or spending a good deal of social time with others, especially members of the opposite sex. Never-married persons tend to spend either a great deal of time in social interactions with friends, relatives, and neighbors or very little time in such social interactions (Seccombe & Ishii-Kuntz, 1994). Married persons tend to spend a more moderate level of time in social interactions with friends, relatives, and neighbors. These findings appear to be in support of the stereotype of never-married persons as either "swingers" or "lonely losers" (Stein, 1976).

Several researchers conducted qualitative studies that investigated the experience of singlehood and the choice to remain single. Stein (1975) conducted interviews with 20 single persons, 10 males and 10 females, who described themselves as choosing to not

marry. Stein found that most of the participants generated positive reasons for choosing to not marry such as “freedom, enjoyment, opportunities to meet people and develop friendships, economic independence, more and better sexual experiences, and personal development.” Female participants in particular expressed that singlehood allowed psychological autonomy and an ability to not put other’s needs before their own. Male participants described singlehood as allowing for a “loosely structured life.” Many of the participants expressed a belief that marriage inhibited personal growth and restricted opportunities. Additionally, participants described a belief that marriage, not singlehood, created a sense of isolation and loneliness.

Lewis and Moon (1997) studied single women’s perceptions of being single in a sample of 37 single women. The single women seemed ambivalent about their single status. The participants described the advantages and disadvantages of singlehood. Although most participants expressed contentment with their single status, they also described feelings of loss and grief.

Several research studies have examined what factors are associated with a higher likelihood of remaining single. Spreitzer and Riley (1974) investigated what factors were associated with singlehood in a study of 2,454 applicants for Social Security disability benefits. The average age of participants in the study was 55 and the average age of onset of the disability was 52. The study’s findings indicate that females with higher levels of intelligence, education, and occupational achievement are more likely to never marry. These findings were consistent with previous studies (Bernard, 1972; Havens, 1973). Conversely, males with higher levels of education and intelligence are the least likely to never marry. Additional findings suggest that males are more likely to never

marry if they experienced “poor interpersonal relations with parents and siblings in their family of orientation” (Spreitzer & Riley, 1974, p. 541).

Some have conceptualized singlehood to be a result or cause of low self-esteem. Frazier et al. (1996) found that never-married individuals reported lower levels of self-esteem than did divorced individuals. The researchers also found that men reported a greater desire for marriage than did women and that never-married persons reported a greater desire for marriage than did divorced persons.

Adult development theories contribute to the perception that singles are deficient or deviant. Single persons do not fit into the traditional theories of adult development (Lewis & Borders, 1995). Most theories include a mid-life stage in which individuals must master the tasks of marriage and having children (Levinson, 1978). These development models contribute to the perception that those individuals who do not marry have not truly grown up (Duberman, 1977).

Additional studies have examined various factors related to singlehood. Research indicates that never-married and divorced adults are more likely than married adults to live with their parents (Aquilino, 1990; White & Peterson, 1995). Unmarried persons are more likely to vote for Democratic candidates than are married persons (Clymer, 1983; Dowd, 1984; New York Times, 1984; Plutzer & McBurnett, 1991). Tharenou (1999) found that childless single employees advanced less in their jobs than married employees, regardless of whether the married employees had children or not. Tharenou reported that the reasons for this discrepancy were unclear; however, he speculated that “a perceived lack of financial need, not conforming to social expectations, or lack of spousal support,” (p. 957) for single employees might account for these results.

## Person Perception Studies

Stereotypes are the attributes that are ascribed to a group (Eagly & Mladinic, 1989). Stereotypes reflect attitudes towards a group and generally involve an aspect of evaluation in which the attitudes are favorable or unfavorable to some degree (Eagly & Mladinic, 1989).

Stereotypical thinking has been investigated through the use of person perception studies (Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2001). Person perception studies are based on the idea that when an individual encounters a target person the individual constructs an impression of the target person based on the beliefs and knowledge they hold about the social category or group to which the target person belongs (Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000, 2001). The perceiver uses schema to make assessments of others rather than making assessments based on the unique set of characteristics of the person being perceived (Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2001). These schema are thought to be activated automatically in response to being presented with a stereotype or schema-related person (Bargh, 1989, 1994).

The conduct of person perception studies often involves presenting participants with written descriptions of a target person and asking the participants to evaluate the target person's characteristics (Madon et al., 1998). The written descriptions include categorical information such as gender, ethnicity, age, and marital status. Several person perception studies have investigated the influence of target persons' marital status on evaluations of these target persons' personal and professional characteristics.

Etaugh and Malstrom (1981) investigated participants' perceptions of stimulus persons that varied by gender and marital status (widowed, divorced, married, and never-

married). Each stimulus person was described as being 41-years-old, holding a master's degree from the University of Illinois, and working as a counseling psychologist. The researchers described choosing the profession of counseling psychologist because they perceived it to be gender neutral. However, it is unclear how gender neutral the profession of counseling psychologist was perceived to be by participants. Participants "rated the stimulus persons on 20 7-point bipolar scales the described person traits (e.g., sociable, happy, secure, and friendly) and professional performance characteristics (e.g., dedicated to career, professionally competent, successful in job)." Although the study's results indicated that males and females were perceived as having similar personal characteristics, married stimulus persons were rated as having more favorable personal characteristics (e.g., secure) than divorced, never-married, or widowed persons. Never-married persons were seen as less attractive than members of the other marital status groups and less sociable than divorced or married persons. The findings also indicated that married stimulus persons were perceived as having less favorable professional performance characteristics than unmarried stimulus persons.

In a similar study by Etaugh and Napoli Birdoes (1991), the researchers investigated whether stimulus persons whose marital status was most common for their age and gender would be viewed more positively. As in previous studies, this study's findings showed that participants perceived married persons more favorably than unmarried persons. The study's findings indicated that achieving the desired marital status in our society is perceived positively regardless of whether it is the most common marital status for the stimulus person's age group.

Stacy and Richman (1997) investigated participants' perceptions of stimulus persons that varied by gender, age (19- or 25-years-old), and marital status (married or dating). Findings indicate that the younger (19-year-old) stimulus persons were perceived to be less mature, less independent, and less sociable than the older (25-year-old) stimulus persons regardless of their marital status.

Jackson and Sullivan (1990) examined how multiple roles influenced person perception. Results indicated that "married persons were seen as better-adjusted and as more competent, likeable, and feminine than single persons," (p.276). Single stimulus persons who had no children were perceived as the least likable of all stimulus groups. While for both sexes, persons who worked and had a family role (spouse and/or parent) were seen as better adjusted and more competent, females who worked and had a family role were rated more favorably than males who worked and had a family role. These results can be understood as indicating that the greater number of roles persons have, the more favorably they are perceived by others. Perhaps participants' difficulty imagining alternative roles of single persons influenced these results (Davis & Strong, 1976).

Results of DePaulo's (2001) study regarding perceptions of single persons indicated that participants perceived prototypical target individuals, about whom they read a brief description, to be significantly more attractive, happier, and more self-assured when they were described as married versus when they were described as single. In addition, the results suggested that participants associated more negative characteristics with single persons, indicating that they were more self-centered, more envious, less interesting, and less adventurous than married persons. The age of the target individual (25 vs. 40) did not appear to influence these results. However, participants

perceived 40-year-old single persons as less happy than 25-year-old single persons, while participants perceived the happiness of married persons at both ages 25 and 40 to be approximately equal. Preliminary results of another study conducted by DePaulo also suggested that male undergraduates may hold a more negative stereotype of single persons than do female undergraduates as male participants in her study rated single persons more negatively than female participants.

DePaulo (2001) speculated about the possible reasons for the more negative perceptions of single persons as compared to married persons. She suggested that adult development theories require that individuals marry and have children in order to be considered “fully adult.” In this way, singles do not hold the status that married persons hold in our society. DePaulo also suggested that singles threaten the “cultural worldview” that marriage is critical to happiness and success in life. Additionally, she hypothesized that in some cases singles are perceived negatively because they are perceived as a sexual threat to some couples.

#### Current Study

Previous research, including that of DePaulo (2001) described above, indicates that single persons are viewed more negatively than married persons. The present study extended DePaulo’s (2001) study regarding stereotypes of single persons with several modifications. This study modified the methodology by which participants evaluated the characteristics of the hypothetical persons. In DePaulo’s study, participants rated how likely hypothetical persons were to have 22 characteristics using a 9-point scale. For example, “How likely is Mark to be: very unhappy or very happy.” Multiple tests of significance were used to analyze the data. In the present study, the methodology

used reduced the number of significance tests that DePaulo's study design required; reducing the number of tests conducted reduced the Type I error rates. In addition, participants in DePaulo's study rated a predetermined list of characteristics. The present study allowed participants to generate their own relevant characteristics. This approach allowed for more flexibility in exploring the wide range of characteristics that young adults may attribute to single persons that may not have been included in the lists of characteristics given by DePaulo.

Based on DePaulo's findings, I formulated two hypotheses. Hypothesis 1 was that single persons would be perceived more negatively than married persons. Hypothesis 2 was that male participants would perceive single persons more negatively than female participants would.

In addition to testing the main hypotheses, I planned to explore the degree to which perceptions of single and married persons were positive as well. The proportions of positive and negative characteristics generated by participants were likely to be correlated, while not perfectly correlated. Therefore, it was also of interest whether married persons would be perceived more positively than single persons. The potential influence of participants' gender and targets' gender on perceptions of hypothetical persons who vary on marital status were also explored.

## Method

### *Participants*

The original sample included 277 introductory psychology students at a large, public, Midwestern university (170 men and 107 women) who participated as one method of obtaining course credit. Twelve participants reported that a language other

than English was their native language. These individuals were not included in the data analysis, resulting in 265 participants whose data were analyzed. The participants' average age was 19.5 years old ( $SD = 1.5$  years), 91.7% of the participants were aged 18 to 21, and the participants' ages ranged from 18 to 29. The race/ethnicity of participants was as follows: 80.8% Caucasian, 14.0% African-American, 1.1% Asian, 2.6% other, 0.8% Hispanic, and 0.8% Native American.

### *Materials*

*Profiles.* Profiles described hypothetical persons who varied by gender (male or female) and marital status (single or married). The eight profiles also included information about the hypothetical persons' job, age, hobby, and city of residence. For example: "Mike is a 33-year-old landscaper living in Denver. He enjoys basketball and is married." The age of all hypothetical persons was listed as between 32 and 35. To control for the possibility that the hypothetical person's job, location, and preferred leisure activity might influence participants' evaluation of the person's characteristics, the descriptions were counterbalanced so each description was supplied in conjunction with a married and a single profile and a male and a female profile. The profiles were presented in a counterbalanced order. Each profile sheet contained a description of one hypothetical person, followed by spaces for participants to list the characteristics they perceived the hypothetical person to have. At the bottom of each sheet was a reminder for participants to work only on the sheet at hand until told to turn to the next page. (See Appendix A for Profile Sheets.)

*Background Questionnaire.* Participants indicated their gender, age, race/ethnicity, relationship/marital status, level of relationship satisfaction, and native

language in response to open-ended and multiple-choice questions. Participants also provided information about how happy they would be if they never married, if they married at 40, and if they were married their entire adult life. In addition, participants rated themselves on several personality variables. (See Appendix B for Background Questionnaire.)

### *Procedure*

Participants attended group sessions that ranged in size from 3 to 17 participants. After reviewing the informed consent form (see Appendix C), participants were given a questionnaire packet that included an additional informed consent form, an instructions page, four hypothetical profiles, and the background questionnaire. Participants were given the following instructions verbally and in written form:

“In this survey, you will read descriptions of 4 different people and tell us what you think each person is like. You will tell us what you think by listing the characteristics you perceive these people to have. The descriptions of the people are very short, but we think you will be able to form many different impressions of them based just on that little bit of information. Read the first description and try to form an impression of what that person is like. Then list characteristics you perceive the person to have. You will have two minutes to list all of the traits you think the person has. Finally, there are a few questions about yourself.”

Participants were asked to turn to the first of four profiles. Participants were asked to read the first of the four profiles. Participants then were instructed that they would be given two minutes to list characteristics of the hypothetical person. After two minutes, participants were instructed to turn to the next page and continue with the next profile. The experimenter monitored participants' compliance with the instructions and kept track of the time with a watch. After listing characteristics for each of the four profiles, the participants completed the short questionnaire.

### *Data coding*

The individual lists of characteristics were transcribed. The average number of characteristics listed for the four stimulus person types (single female stimulus persons, married female stimulus persons, single male stimulus persons, and married male stimulus persons) was 6.84, 7.52, 7.39, and 7.03 respectively. The minimum number of characteristics listed for a profile was zero while the maximum number of characteristics listed for a profile was 20. A master list of all characteristics was generated. This allowed each term to be rated consistently across lists and prevented context effects. Each characteristic on the master list was evaluated by two raters, the principal investigator and a research assistant, as negative (e.g., “perverted,” “phony”), positive (e.g., “friendly,” “intelligent”), or neutral (e.g., “medium build,” “has pets”). Additional examples of positive, negative, and neutral terms can be found in Appendix D. Interrater reliability was 86% agreement for all characteristics, 91% for negative characteristics, 85% for neutral characteristics, and 84% for positive characteristics. The overall percent agreement was computed by dividing the number of characteristics evaluated the same by both raters by the total number of characteristics. Interrater reliability was computed for the negative, neutral, and positive characteristics categories by using the principal investigator’s ratings as a criterion and computing the percentage of instances in which the research assistant agreed with these ratings. Due to the high degree of agreement between raters, the primary investigator’s ratings were used for data analysis.

For each individual list, the total number of characteristics, the number of negative characteristics, and the number of positive characteristics were tabulated. Many of the participants generated lists that included redundant terms (e.g., “smart” and

“intelligent”). When terms were judged to be synonymous, they were counted as a single characteristic. However, terms that were similar but not synonymous were counted as separate characteristics.

## Results

Correlational analyses were conducted to determine the association between the percent of total responses that were negative and the percent of total responses that were positive for the four groups (single female stimulus persons, married female stimulus persons, single male stimulus persons, and married male stimulus persons). These analyses revealed correlations of -.51, -.58, -.62, and -.53 respectively. These correlations indicated that as stimulus persons were rated more negatively they were likely to be rated less positively as well. However, correlations were moderate which indicates a partial, but not complete, overlap in concept. Thus, separate analyses were conducted for positive and negative characteristics.

### *Negative characteristics*

A 2 (Participant Gender) x 2 (Target Marital Status) x 2 (Target Gender) analysis of variance (ANOVA) with repeated measures on target marital status and target gender was conducted on the percent of total responses that were negative. Main effects for participant gender, target marital status, and target gender were significant,  $F(1,260) = 5.56, p < .05$ ,  $F(1,260) = 17.28, p < .001$ , and  $F(1,260) = 4.66, p < .05$ , respectively. In support of hypothesis 1, our findings showed that single stimulus persons were rated more negatively than married stimulus persons. Results also indicated that male participants rated stimulus persons more negatively than female participants, and male stimulus persons were rated more negatively than female stimulus persons. These effects

were modified by a significant Participant Gender x Target Marital Status interaction,  $F(1,260) = 3.82, p \leq .05$ , as well as a marginally significant Participant Gender x Target Gender interaction,  $F(1,260) = 2.76, p < .10$ . All other interactions were not significant. Means are shown in Tables 1 and 2. As planned, additional repeated measures ANOVA's were also conducted to probe these significant and marginally significant interactions. In support of Hypothesis 2, the results of these analyses indicated that male participants rated single persons more negatively than female participants,  $F(1,260) = 8.60, p \leq .005$ . Findings indicate that male participants rated single stimulus persons more negatively than married persons,  $F(1,162) = 20.66, p \leq .001$ , while female participants' ratings of single and married stimulus persons were not significantly different,  $F(1,103) = 2.66, p = .11$ . In addition, the results showed that male participants rated male stimulus persons more negatively than female participants,  $F(1,261) = 7.28, p \leq .01$ .

#### *Positive characteristics*

A 2 (Participant Gender) x 2 (Target Marital Status) x 2 (Target Gender) analysis of variance (ANOVA) with repeated measures on target marital status and target gender was conducted on the percent of total responses that were positive. Main effects for participant gender and target marital status were significant,  $F(1,260) = 12.75, p < .001$ , and  $F(1,260) = 18.54, p < .001$ , respectively, but modified by a Participant Gender x Target Marital Status interaction,  $F(1,260) = 6.77, p \leq .01$ . Findings indicated that female participants rated stimulus persons more positively than male participants, and married stimulus persons were rated more positively than single stimulus persons. The main effect for target gender was not significant. Post-hoc repeated measures ANOVA

Table 1

*Percentage of Responses That Were Negative – Means and Standard Deviations*

Participants	<u>Targets</u>			
	Female		Male	
	Married	Single	Married	Single
Male	9.4 (16.0)	17.7 (22.1)	15.7 (21.6)	21.9 (23.1)
Female	11.6 (17.7)	13.5 (19.9)	11.5 (20.1)	14.9 (16.2)
All Participants	10.2 (16.7)	16.0 (21.3)	14.1 (21.1)	19.2 (20.9)

Table 2

*Percentage of Responses That Were Negative – Means and Standard Deviations*

Participants	Targets				
	Married	Single	Female	Male	All targets
Male	12.2 (14.7)	20.4 (17.0)	13.2 (15.5)	18.6 (17.1)	16.2 (11.9)
Female	11.2 (11.4)	14.0 (13.0)	12.7 (14.8)	13.4 (13.9)	12.7 (9.3)
All Participants	11.8 (13.5)	17.9 (15.9)	13.0 (15.2)	16.6 (16.1)	14.8 (11.0)

analyses with Bonferroni correction (critical alpha = .025) were conducted to explore the Participant Gender x Target Marital Status interaction. These analyses indicated that male participants rated married stimulus persons more positively than single stimulus persons,  $F(1,260) = 27.27, p < .001$ , while female participants' ratings of married and single stimulus persons did not differ significantly,  $p > .025$ .

Results also revealed a significant Participant Gender x Target Gender x Target Marital Status interaction,  $F(1,260) = 7.02, p < .01$ , as well as a significant Target Gender x Target Marital Status interaction,  $F(1,260) = 18.71, p < .001$ . Means are shown in Tables 3 and 4. Post-hoc repeated measures ANOVA analyses were conducted to explore these significant interactions. Results were corrected for Type I error ( $p < .003$ ) and ( $p < .025$ ), respectively. Findings showed that male participants rated married female stimulus persons more positively than married male stimulus persons,  $F(1,161) = 28.33, p < .001$ , while male participants' ratings of single female and single male stimulus persons did not differ significantly. Results also indicated that male participants rated married female targets more positively than single female targets,  $F(1,160) = 57.92, p < .001$ , while male participants' ratings of married male and single male stimulus persons did not differ significantly. For female participants, no significant differences in ratings were found. These analyses also indicated that married targets were rated significantly more positively when female than when male,  $F(1,262) = 15.49, p < .001$ . One-way ANOVA's and paired t-tests were conducted to explore the interactions further. Results of these analyses indicated that female participants rated single female targets more positively than male participants,  $F(1,261) = 15.55, p < .001$ . The remainder of these analyses were not significant at the corrected critical alpha level,  $p > .003$ .

Table 3

*Percentage of Responses That Were Positive – Means and Standard Deviations*

Participants	<u>Targets</u>			
	Female		Male	
	Married	Single	Married	Single
Male	64.5 (27.0)	44.7 (27.8)	50.9 (27.9)	50.9 (28.5)
Female	63.2 (24.3)	58.4 (26.9)	59.9 (28.3)	59.9 (24.1)
All Participants	64.0 (25.9)	50.0 (28.2)	54.4 (28.4)	54.4 (27.2)

Table 4

*Percentage of Responses That Were Positive – Means and Standard Deviations*

Participants	Targets				
	Married	Single	Female	Male	All targets
Male	57.7 (21.6)	47.8 (20.3)	54.6 (21.9)	50.9 (22.2)	52.8 (16.9)
Female	61.6 (18.7)	59.1 (18.8)	60.8 (20.8)	59.9 (22.3)	60.3 (15.9)
All Participants	59.7 (20.6)	53.5 (20.3)	57.7 (21.6)	54.4 (22.6)	55.7 (16.8)

## Discussion

The results of this study indicated that when male participants self-generated characteristics of target persons, they attributed a greater percentage of negative characteristics to single stimulus persons than they did to married stimulus persons. Additionally, male participants attributed a greater percentage of positive characteristics to married stimulus persons than they did to single stimulus persons. These results are very much in line with the notion that single persons are perceived more negatively than married persons (Etaugh & Malstrom, 1981; Etaugh & Napoli Birdoes, 1991; Jackson & Sullivan, 1990; DePaulo, 2001). However, the present study's results differed from those of previous studies (e.g., Etaugh & Napoli Birdoes, 1991) in that female participants did not attribute a greater percentage of negative characteristics to single persons than to married persons nor did they attribute a greater percentage of positive characteristics to married persons than to single persons.

Hypothesis 1, that single persons would be perceived more negatively than married persons, was supported for male participants only. Similarly, our results indicated that males viewed married persons more positively than single persons. This study's results also supported Hypothesis 2 that male participants would view single persons significantly more negatively than female participants. What might lead young males to view single persons more negatively than married persons? In addressing this question, it seems important first to consider what might lead any person to view single persons more negatively than married persons. One explanation for the more negative perception of single persons is that these individuals do not conform to the societal norm of marriage. People may infer that single persons' personal and social inadequacies

rendered them undesirable to potential marriage partners (Burnley & Kurth, 1992). This assumption may lead to a negative view of single persons. The lack of understanding of how single persons spend their time may make it more likely that others speculate that single persons hold “deviant motives” and engage in “deviant behaviors” (Davis & Strong, 1976). Singles also may be viewed more negatively based on actual characteristics of single persons as a group. As reviewed earlier in this document, it has been found that never-married individuals are more likely to experience depression than are married persons (Pearlin & Johnson, 1977) and that never-married persons are likely to experience less life satisfaction than married persons (White, 1992; Yoder & Nichols, 1980).

In the present study, males viewed single persons more negatively and less positively than married persons, while females did not view single persons more negatively or less positively than married persons. One possible explanation for these results would be that males use more stereotyped thinking than do females. Studies investigating the perception of discrimination and prejudice indicate that women are more likely to see potentially prejudiced events as prejudiced (Inman & Baron, 1996). Inman and Baron proposed a possible explanation of these results using the concept of the “sensitive victim.” The sensitive victim is a member of an oppressed group that is more sensitive to potential prejudice as a result of their experience with prejudice and oppression. The sensitive victim explanation for awareness of potential prejudice might also apply to the results found in the present study. Perhaps females are less likely to rely on stereotypes related to marital status and gender as a result of their negative experiences being the target of gender-stereotyped thinking. In this way, the sensitive

victim explanation might explain females' reduced use of stereotyped thinking related to single persons.

One goal of the present study was to extend DePaulo's (2001) study regarding stereotypes of single persons with several modifications. The present study modified the methodology by which participants evaluated the characteristics of stimulus persons who varied on gender and marital status. Participants in DePaulo's study rated a predetermined list of characteristics, while participants in the present study generated characteristics they perceived stimulus persons to hold. The present study's findings indicated that male participants perceived single stimulus persons to have a greater proportion of negative characteristics than married persons. This finding was in line with DePaulo's findings that participants rated single stimulus persons more negatively on a range of predetermined characteristics. However, in the present study, female participants did not perceive single stimulus persons to have a greater proportion of negative characteristics than married persons. This finding was unique to the present study. It is unclear to what extent the modified methodology used in the present study influenced the differences between the present study's findings and DePaulo's findings. The present study's methodology also reduced the need for many tests of significance to analyze the data, thus reducing the Type I error rates. Therefore, the present studies findings were less likely than DePaulo's findings to be influenced by Type I error.

In the present study, undergraduate female participants were more likely to rate target persons more positively and less negatively than undergraduate male participants were. These results are consistent with several person perception studies in which undergraduate female participants were more likely to rate stimulus persons more

positively and less negatively than undergraduate male participants (Etaugh & Napoli Birdoes, 1991). One possible explanation of this finding is that women's social status might make them more likely to rate others favorably. Further research might investigate what factors influence these patterns of evaluation.

Results of this study indicated that male participants viewed married females more positively than single females, while female participants did not view married and single females differently in terms of positive characteristics. Perhaps the idea that women are socialized to be more relational in nature (Gilligan, 1993) and also that women derive satisfaction from taking care of others leads female singles to be viewed less positively than married females by members of today's society. Single women might be conceived of as not fulfilling the relational requirements of women. Findings suggested that males may be more likely to think positively of women who meet these relational requirements than females are.

This study had several limitations. First, this study involved experimental manipulation of marital status and gender of target persons while counterbalancing the other descriptors of the target persons. By counterbalancing the other descriptors, we attempted to reduce or eliminate the influence of these descriptors on the perceptions of the targets. Despite the benefits of this technique, the technique also results in "operationalizing away real group differences" (Madon et al., 1998, p. 1306) causing targets from legitimately different social groups to appear equivalent on the whole. Madon et al. explained that "experiments that operationalize away group differences may not provide information about how stereotypes influence person perception when groups

really differ” (p. 1306). This will likely influence the generalizability of results of studies using this methodology, including the present study.

Second, the present study involved the evaluation (positive, negative, or neutral) by two raters of the characteristics generated by participants. While there was high interrater agreement between the two raters, certain characteristics may have a positive meaning in certain contexts and a neutral meaning in other contexts (e.g., always busy, driven, talkative, and competitive). All characteristics were evaluated in a master list format that did not allow for context to influence the raters’ evaluations. While the prevention of context effects is a notable strength, in some cases context might have allowed for a more appropriate rating of a particular characteristic. For example, the characteristic “competitive” might be perceived as positive, negative, or neutral based on context.

Another limitation of the present study is that single targets were compared to married targets, while not accounting for differences that might exist among never-married, divorced, and widowed individuals. Beyond these civil status distinctions, the present study did not differentiate between heterosexual and homosexual persons, nor did it address cohabiting persons who do not marry. By not specifying in the target descriptions whether the targets were never-married, widowed, or divorced or heterosexual or homosexual, it is unclear what specific group of single persons and sexual orientation the participants considered when generating their lists of characteristics for the single stimulus persons. The other factors that may have influenced ratings were not systematically varied. As a result, error variance may have been introduced into the study.

In addition, researchers have proposed that among never-married individuals various subgroups exist. Stein (1981) developed a typology of never-married singles that categorizes never-married persons into four groups based on whether individuals are voluntarily or involuntarily single and whether the single status is stable or temporary. Voluntary temporary singles are never-married persons who are open to the idea of marriage but are not currently seeking a partner. Voluntary stable singles are never-married persons who have chosen to remain single permanently. Involuntary temporary singles are never-married persons who are actively seeking a partner but have yet to find one. Involuntary stable singles are never-married persons who have sought to find a mate and have yet to do so, but who believe that they will never find a partner and have resigned themselves to permanent singlehood. Participants in this study may have been imagining single persons from several of these subcategories when generating characteristics. The ambiguity surrounding the nature of the stimulus persons' single status may have contributed to error variance.

Stimulus persons were all listed as being between the ages of 32 and 35. Results likely were influenced by the age group of the stimulus persons. As a result, our results cannot be assumed to be generalizable to other age groups. However, one previous study found that never-married persons were perceived similarly regardless of the stimulus persons' age (24 or 45) and gender (Etaugh & Napoli Birdoes, 1991). Therefore, it is unclear to what extent the age of the stimulus persons in the present study influenced the results found.

Males' relatively greater attribution of negative characteristics to single persons may have far reaching implications for single persons and society at large. It is suggested

that future research investigate how the evaluation of single persons as having more negative characteristics than their married counterparts might affect single persons' social interactions, economic possibilities, self-esteem, and interpersonal interactions. In fact, one team of researchers has begun to examine whether stereotypes of single persons might result in discrimination against single persons and whether civil status discrimination exists. Morris, DePaulo, and Sinclair (2002) found that civil status discrimination was perceived as more legitimate and acceptable than other forms of discrimination, with the exception of discrimination against elderly persons. Single participants were more likely to view civil status discrimination as unjustified than were married participants. These authors proposed that civil status discrimination was not publicly acknowledged or recognized. In DePaulo's presentation at the 2001 APA Conference, she stated,

“When people realize that their behaviors are discriminatory, then they can, if they wish to, decide to change their behaviors. They can try deliberately to refrain from behaving unfairly toward other persons or groups. But without that awareness, there are no psychological brakes on discrimination, and the unfairness is left to run amuck.”

Thus, if the more negative views of single persons and civil status discrimination against single persons are brought into public consciousness, individuals can choose alternative behavior and can modify their beliefs about single persons.

The growing body of research findings related to more negative perceptions of single persons highlights the lack of understanding of why these more negative perceptions exist. Additional research might investigate what factors influence the development and maintenance of these more negative perceptions of single persons as compared to married persons.

Several things may limit the generalizability of this study's findings. The participants in this study were young adults. Further research might explore whether a more negative view of single persons, as compared to married persons, continues on into middle and late adulthood. In addition, researchers might investigate the perceptions married, divorced, widowed, and never-married adults of different ages have of single persons. Researchers might study the perceptions held of the various subgroups of single persons (never-married, widowed, and divorced). Additional research might investigate whether the ethnicity and socioeconomic status of perceivers or stimulus persons influence perceptions of individuals of differing marital status categories. In addition, many of the studies referred to in this paper are over 20 years old (Cargan, 1981; Etaugh & Malstrom, 1981; Pearlin & Johnson, 1977; Thornton & Freedman, 1981; Veroff et al., 1981). Several of these studies merit replication.

Further research might explore what might be behind the discrepancy between male and female participants' perceptions of single versus married persons. It is recommended that future studies investigate whether females and males differ in the extent to which they use stereotyped thinking when perceiving individuals of different civil status categories. This research might use several methodologies, including the one used in the present study, to explore these perceptions. Additional studies may be wise to investigate whether males' more negative views influence males' behavior towards single persons within a community. For example, how might such views influence males' perceptions of and behavior toward a single person who agrees to lead a scout troop or interviews for a position in a business setting?

In light of the finding that males perceive single persons more negatively than married persons and married persons more positively than single persons, it seems important for further research to be performed regarding the status of single persons in today's society. This research will help social scientists to better understand how perceptions of single persons are formed, how these perceptions might influence the experiences of single persons, and increase awareness of the status differential between civil status categories.

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## Appendix A

In this survey, you will read descriptions of 4 different people and tell us what you think each person is like. You will tell us what you think by listing the characteristics you perceive these people to have. The descriptions of the people are very short, but we think you will be able to form many different impressions of them based just on that little bit of information.

Read the description and try to form an impression of what that person is like. Then list characteristics you perceive the person to have. You will have 120 seconds to list all of the traits you think the person has.

Finally, there are a few questions about yourself.

There are no right or wrong answers to the questions about the 4 people. Just tell us what you think each person is like. If you have questions, ask the person who gave you this booklet.

This questionnaire is completely anonymous. You do not need to put your name anywhere.

Thank you for your help!

Now, turn the page to begin the survey.









**Appendix B**  
**Information about You**

**Please answer each of the following questions about yourself. Please be as honest as possible.**

1. Are you male or female? \_\_\_\_\_
2. How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_
3. What is your civil (marital) status? Please check one of the following.
  - single and not dating regularly
  - single and dating regularly
  - single and living with a romantic partner
  - married for the first time
  - separated
  - divorced and not remarried
  - remarried
  - widowed
  - other (please describe: \_\_\_\_\_ )
4. If you are currently in a romantic relationship, how satisfied are you with your current romantic relationship? *Circle the answer that applies.* (1 = not at all; 2 = slightly; 3 = somewhat; 4 = definitely more satisfied than not; 5 = very satisfied).
5. What is your native language? Please check one.
  - English
  - Spanish
  - Other (please write it here: \_\_\_\_\_ )
6. What is your race?
  - Asian
  - Black

- Hispanic
- Native American
- White
- Other (write your race here: \_\_\_\_\_)

7. How happy do you think you would be if you stayed single your entire adult life?  
(circle one number)

not very happy at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 very happy

8. How happy do you think you would be if you were married your entire adult life?  
(circle one number)

not very happy at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 very happy

9. How happy do you think you would be if you stayed single until you were 40-  
years old? (circle one number)

not very happy at all 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 very happy

Please rate **yourself** according to the following scales:

- |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |  |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|--|
| 10. Sociable, assertive,<br>active, extraverted | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Reserved, quiet<br>introverted, passive      |
| 11. Sensitive, nervous<br>worrying, emotional   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Relaxed, calm<br>secure, at ease             |
| 12. Curious, creative,<br>imaginative           | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Conventional,<br>down-to-earth               |
| 13. Compassionate,<br>trusting, soft-hearted    | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Skeptical, competitive<br>hard-headed, proud |
| 14. Conscientious, careful,<br>well-organized   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Carefree, easygoing,<br>disorganized         |

## Appendix C

### Informed Consent Form

*University of Cincinnati*  
*Department of Psychology*  
*Julie Wernke*  
*513-556-5580*

Before agreeing to participate in this study, it is important that the following explanation of the proposed procedures be read and understood. It describes the purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits of this study. It also describes the right to withdraw from the study at any time. It is important to understand that not guarantee or assurance can be made as to the results of the study.

This study is designed to investigate perceptions you have of other people. I understand that this study involves a group administration of questionnaires including questions about my perceptions of the characteristics of others. In addition, I understand that I will answer questions about my beliefs and behaviors.

I understand that the information I report on questionnaires is anonymous, and that I should not put my name or any other identifying information on any of the forms—and that roughly 100 other individuals will participate. I understand that my participation should take less than one hour, that it is voluntary, and that I am free to withdraw without penalty or negative consequences. I also understand that other options for my research participation are available through my Psychology class syllabus. I understand that any questions I have can be directed to Dr. Kevin Corcoran in the Psychology Department (556-5580), or to the Institutional Review Board - Social & Behavioral Sciences at 558-5784.

If I have questions about the research or my rights as a participant I may contact Dr. Corcoran at 556-5580 or Dr. Margaret Miller to Chair, Institutional Review Board - Social & Behavioral Sciences at 558-5784.

I understand that I may gain some insight into how research is conducted in Psychology, and that there are few--if any--negative consequences from participating (if you would like to talk with anyone about *any* negative effects from your participation, please contact the or the Psychological Services Center [556-0648]). My continued participation in this study, by completing the questionnaires, is an indication that I have read the above material and am consenting to participate.

## Appendix D

<u>Positive</u>	<u>Negative</u>	<u>Neutral</u>
Accepting	Afraid	Alternative
Agreeable	Bitter	Bearded
Ambitious	Cheater	Conservative
Bright	Deceitful	Doesn't like snow
Classy	Egotistical	Emotional
Communicates well	Freak	Hangs out in sports bars
Devoted	Gloomy	Intense
Easy going	Harlot	Idealist
Likeable	Impatient	Likes beer
Likes to have fun	Lacks people skills	Needs to move around
Neat	Melancholy	Only child
Open	Not very popular	Partier
Patient	Passive aggressive	Quiet
Quick witted	Restless	Stays up late
Relaxed	Scared of change	Talkative
Self-sufficient	Trapped	Vegetarian
Willing to listen	Weird	Works long hours

## Appendix E

*Most frequently listed characteristics for target marital status and target gender*

<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Married</u>	<u>Single</u>
Smart (115)	Smart (107)	Smart (101)	Smart (121)
Athletic (87)	Athletic (84)	Athletic (85)	Athletic (86)
Outgoing (84)	Intelligent (84)	Loving (83)	Intelligent (81)
Intelligent (77)	Outgoing (74)	Outgoing (80)	Lonely (79)
Caring (51)	Happy (67)	Intelligent (80)	Outgoing (78)
Friendly (46)	Quiet (61)	Caring (76)	Independent (77)
Loving (45)	Independent (61)	Happy (75)	Shy (62)
Shy (45)	Caring (53)	Quiet (47)	Quiet (58)
Quiet (44)	Loving (44)	Patient (47)	Friendly (47)
Happy (40)	Friendly (44)	Friendly (43)	Fun (37)
Lonely (40)	Lonely (43)	Boring (37)	Boring (36)
Nice (36)	Boring (42)	Educated (36)	Nice (34)
Fun (33)	Patient (38)	Nice (34)	Happy (32)
Patient (33)	Fun (37)	Fun (33)	Educated (32)

## Appendix F

*Most frequently listed characteristics for each profile type*

<u>Male, Single</u>	<u>Male, Married</u>	<u>Female, Married</u>	<u>Female, Single</u>
Smart (93)	Outgoing (48)	Athletic (82)	Independent (50)
Athletic (84)	Loving (42)	Smart (79)	Lonely (42)
Intelligent (58)	Happy (32)	Intelligent (61)	Outgoing (48)
Shy (41)	Caring (31)	Caring (45)	Smart (28)
Lonely (37)	Friendly (26)	Happy (43)	Friendly (27)
Outgoing (36)	Smart (22)	Loving (41)	Quiet (26)
Quiet (32)	Laid back (22)	Quiet (35)	Happy (24)
Educated (29)	Talkative (21)	Educated (32)	Intelligent (23)
Independent (27)	Creative (20)	Outgoing (36)	Shy (21)
Friendly (20)	Intelligent (19)	Patient (31)	Fun (20)
Caring (20)	Nice (17)	Boring (23)	Creative (20)
Active (20)	Persuasive (16)	Energetic (19)	Boring (19)
Nice (19)	Patient (16)	Active (18)	Talkative (17)
Fun (17)	Fun (16)	Responsible (17)	Artistic (17)
Likes kids (17)	Artistic (15)	Nice (17)	Nice (15)
Boring (17)		Friendly (17)	
Patient (17)		Tall (17)	
Energetic (16)		Fun (17)	
		Kind (16)	
		Organized (16)	