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How Does Sexual Orientation Affect Perceptions of Single People?

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ABSTRACT. Past research has found that single people are perceived more negatively than coupled people. However, in past research, the target's sexual orientation was not explicitly mentioned. The current experiment manipulated the sexual orientation of targets and also measured the sexual orientation of participants to test whether the relatively negative perceptions of single people are held about people and believed by people regardless of their sexual orientation. Three hundred ninety heterosexual and 226 gay and lesbian participants from Israel and the United States read descriptions of target people. Targets were described as heterosexual, gay, or lesbian; single or in a long-term relationship; and men or women. Although single people were consistently perceived more negatively than coupled people, $F(1, 600) = 130.78, p < .001, \eta^2 = .18$, participants perceived the differences between coupled and single targets as being largest when they rated targets of the same sexual orientation as themselves, $F(1, 600) = 10.38, p = .001, \eta^2 = 0.02$. Furthermore, regardless of their own sexual orientation, participants who expressed a stronger desire for a long-term romantic relationship held more negative views of single people compared to coupled people, $r = .10, p < .01$.

Adults spend more of their lives single than they once did. People are marrying for the first time later in life than they did 40 years ago (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011), and the percentage of people who choose not to marry at all has increased (Klinenberg, 2012). However, despite the fact that being a single adult is more common than it once was, past research has shown that single people are viewed more negatively than married people. Compared to married individuals, single people are thought to be more immature, self-centered, miserable, lonely, and risky, as well as less well-adjusted, happy, attractive, responsible, sociable, warm, and caring (Conley & Collins, 2002; Etaugh & Malstrom, 1981; Hertel, Schütz, DePaulo, Morris, & Stucke, 2007; Morris, DePaulo, Hertel, & Taylor, 2008; Morris, Sinclair, & DePaulo, 2007). Studies in which the age of the target has been manipulated have shown that, although the negative perceptions of single people are stronger

as single people become older (40 years old), these negative perceptions still exist even among 25-year-old targets (Hertel et al., 2007; Morris et al., 2008). Research has demonstrated that people have negative perceptions of both single men and single women, and they do so regardless of the perceiver's own sex, age, or relationship status (Etaugh & Malstrom, 1981; Greitemeyer, 2009; Hertel et al., 2007; Morris et al., 2007; Morris et al., 2008).

Although the negative perceptions of single people have been replicated across studies, and the effect sizes are quite large (Greitemeyer, 2009; Morris et al., 2007; Morris et al., 2008), a potential weakness of past studies is that the sexual orientation of the targets was never explicitly stated. It is possible that the omission of sexual orientation information in past studies might have led participants to assume that the comparison of married versus single targets implied that the targets were heterosexual, given that most people self-identify as heterosexual

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(Mosher, Chandra, & Jones, 2005; Savin-Williams, 2006), and only heterosexual people can legally marry in many places. If that were the case, it is not clear if the negative perceptions of single people would apply to gay men and lesbians in the same way that they apply to heterosexual targets. In the current study, the sexual orientation of the targets was explicitly stated and manipulated to test whether the past research documenting negative perceptions of single people would be replicated with gay and lesbian targets. This question is particularly timely given the major societal shifts in the United States regarding increasingly positive attitudes toward gay men and lesbians over time (Pew Research Center, 2013), increasing visibility of openly gay or lesbian relationships, and, most recently, the Supreme Court's decision to legalize marriage equality in all 50 states. Now that marriage is a viable option for gay men and lesbians, they too may be perceived negatively if they are not on the path toward marriage by at least being in a romantic relationship.

Even though gay and lesbian single people in many countries still do not have the legal right to marry, they may still be perceived more negatively than gay and lesbian people who are in relationships (whether married or unmarried). Although much of the past work on the perceptions of single people has compared single people to married targets (Etaugh & Malstrom, 1981; Hertel et al., 2007; Morris et al., 2008), several recent studies have tested perceptions based upon relationship status rather than marital status. In studies that test the effects of relationship status on perceptions, the comparisons are made between targets in unmarried romantic relationships and targets not in romantic relationships at all. When compared to unmarried coupled people, single targets were perceived as having lower self-esteem and as being less well-adjusted, warm, sociable, extroverted, attractive, agreeable, and conscientious, as well as more immature, self-centered, neurotic, lonely, and miserable (Conley & Collins, 2002; Greitemeyer, 2009; Morris et al., 2008, Experiment 3; Slonim, Gur-Yaish, & Katz, 2015). Although the negative perceptions of single people compared to coupled people increased with age, participants still held negative perceptions of 25-year-old single people (Greitemeyer, 2009) and even had negative perceptions of college students who were not currently in romantic relationships or had no past romantic relationships (Morris et al., 2008). Notably, even though negative perceptions about single people

are commonly held and accepted as true (DePaulo, 2006), a study that attempted to test the accuracy of the perceptions found no significant differences in the personality characteristics of single, dating, and married participants (Greitemeyer, 2009).

Because past research on the perceptions of single people has not manipulated the sexual orientation of the targets, it is not clear if the positive perceptions of coupled people and the negative perceptions of single people apply to gay men and lesbians for whom legal marriage is becoming more common and acceptable in certain places. Even before same-sex marriage was legalized in any U.S. states, 74% of gay men and lesbians indicated that they would like to get married someday (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2001). Whether people live in places where gay men and lesbians can legally marry or not, it may be the case that single people who are gay or lesbian are perceived more negatively than coupled gay men or coupled lesbians just as single heterosexual people are perceived more negatively than coupled but unmarried heterosexual people (Conley & Collins, 2002; Greitemeyer, 2009; Morris et al., 2008; Slonim et al., 2015). Being in a romantic relationship may be considered highly important as a step toward marriage, consistent with the ideology of marriage and family (DePaulo & Morris, 2005), and also as a presumed indication of well-adjustment and maturity. Long before marriage equality was legalized in the United States, many gay men and lesbians expressed a desire to be in a long-term romantic relationship (Bell & Weinberg, 1978).

Given that gay men and lesbians value being in romantic relationships (Peplau & Spalding, 2000) and marriage equality is becoming more common, we hypothesized that single gay men and lesbians would be perceived more negatively than coupled gay men and lesbians, thus providing evidence that the negative perceptions of single people apply regardless of sexual orientation (Hypothesis 1).

It has been argued that single people are stereotyped and discriminated against due to a widely accepted ideology of marriage and family (DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Morris et al., 2008). According to this belief system, the marital relationship is assumed to be the most important relationship an adult can have (Coontz, 2005; DePaulo, 2006; Gillis, 2004) and achieving such a relationship is viewed as a crucial developmental milestone signifying emotional maturity and life satisfaction. The importance placed upon the marital relationship relative to friendships and kin relationships increased

greatly over the course of the 20th century as marriage became equated with happiness and personal fulfillment (Coontz, 2005). Recent research has suggested that single people who desire to become married, thereby demonstrating that they share the cultural belief in the importance of marriage, are perceived more positively than single people who choose to remain single (Morris & Osburn, 2016; Slonim et al., 2015). Single people who desire to be in a relationship evoke feelings of sympathy, and single people who choose to remain single evoke feelings of anger (Slonim et al., 2015).

The importance that people place upon marriage has not declined despite the fact that singlehood is now much more common than it was previously (Klinenberg, 2012). Although people are marrying later in life compared to 40 years ago (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011) and divorce is common, single people still strongly value both marriage and romantic relationships (Willoughby, Carroll, Vitas, & Hill, 2012). In a panel study of 836 single adults in the Netherlands, 85% of single people expressed more positive attitudes about being in a romantic relationship than about being single (Poortman & Liefbroer, 2010). Single people also reported less satisfaction with their relationship status than dating or married people did (Greitemeyer, 2009). The positive views that single people hold about marriage and romantic relationships may lead them to think negatively about other single people. In fact, not only married and coupled people but even single people themselves have negative perceptions about their own group and discriminate against single people (Greitemeyer, 2009; Hertel et al., 2007; Morris et al., 2007, 2008). Branscombe, Cronin, Brinkley, and Nichols (2012) found that single people show the most bias against their own group when they think that an advantage based on marital status is legitimate and when they expect to marry at some point themselves, thereby lowering their identification with their own devalued group. This finding can explain why single people have negative perceptions about their own group given that single people generally accept discrimination based on marital status as legitimate (Morris et al., 2007) and most people expect to marry at some point in their lives (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). In support of the idea that the negative perceptions of single people are a byproduct of an ideology of marriage and family, single people are particularly likely to derogate their own group when they feel angst about the possibility that the value of the

institution of marriage is threatened (Cronin, 2010). One would expect that people who highly value romantic relationships might have especially strong negative perceptions of single people.

Past studies about the perceptions of single people have not gathered data regarding the sexual orientation of participants. Given that 90 to 97% of people consider themselves heterosexual (Mosher et al., 2005; Ward, Dahlhamer, Galinsky, & Joestl, 2014), it is likely that past research about single people has measured the perceptions held by predominantly heterosexual samples. It is unknown whether gay and lesbian participants have negative perceptions based on relationship status in the same way that heterosexual participants do. However, given that gay men and lesbians also have a strong desire to be in relationship, it is likely that they, too, have negative perceptions of single people who have not attained the highly valued goal of a romantic relationship. The current study tested, among both heterosexual and gay and lesbian participants, whether the desire to be in a romantic relationship is correlated with holding more negative perceptions about single than coupled people. We hypothesized that people who express a strong desire for a long-term romantic relationship, thus accepting at least part of the ideology of marriage and family, would have more negative perceptions of single people compared to coupled people (Hypothesis 2).

The pattern that single people are perceived more negatively than married people and coupled people has been replicated in several countries including the United States (Conley & Collins, 2002; Etaugh & Malstrom, 1981; Morris et al., 2008), Germany (Greitemeyer, 2009; Hertel et al., 2007), Israel (Slonim et al., 2015), and Singapore (Au & Lau, 2010). The design of the current study expanded on past research by including both heterosexual and gay or lesbian targets described as single or in a relationship, by recruiting a diverse sample of both heterosexual and gay and lesbian participants from Israel and the United States, and by measuring participants' own desire for a long-term romantic relationship. Furthermore, the current study tested whether the negative perceptions of single people apply to gay men and lesbians in the same way that they apply to heterosexual men and women (Hypothesis 1) and whether people who strongly desire being in a romantic relationship hold more negative views of single people than coupled people (Hypothesis 2). The cross-cultural aspect of this design increased the external validity

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of the current study by examining perceptions of heterosexual, and gay or lesbian couples and single people in two countries: Israel where gay men and lesbians cannot legally marry and the United States where marriage equality was only legal in certain states at the time of this study but has since become legal in all 50 states.

Method

Participants

Six hundred eighty-six people from Israel ($n = 291$) and the United States ($n = 395$) participated in the current online study. Fifty-seven percent of participants were heterosexual, 33% were gay or lesbian, and 10% identified themselves as other. Only those who identified themselves as either heterosexual, gay, or lesbian were included in further analyses ($n = 616$). Thus, the scope of this study does not include perceptions held by people who self-identified as "other." Of the sample included in the data analyses, 63% were heterosexual, 37% were gay or lesbian, 66% were women, and 34% were men. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 80 ($M = 33.90$, $SD = 12.62$).

Fifty-four percent were coupled, which included being married, engaged, or in a long-term relationship. Forty-six percent were single (not currently in a long-term relationship), which included being never married, divorced, separated, or widowed. It should be noted that, at the time of this experiment, gay marriage was neither legal in Israel nor in most of the United States. In the U.S. sample, 74% were European American, 9% were African American, 6% were Asian or Pacific Islander, 6% were Latino, 3% were biracial or multi-racial, 0.3% were Native American, and 0.7% identified as other. In the Israeli sample, 88% had been born in Israel and the other participants came from Europe (10%), the United States (1.5%), and Latin America (0.5%). Information regarding ethnicity was only gathered in the U.S. survey, and country of origin was only gathered in the Israeli survey. The sample included a wide range of education levels: no high school diploma (2%), high school diploma (13%), completed some college (25%), college degree (31%), master's degree (24%), PhD, JD, MD, or MBA (4%), and other (1%).

Participants from the United States were made aware of the present online study via advertisements in the volunteer section of the website, Craig's List, as well as online news websites targeted toward gay men and lesbians in various cities. Participants from Israel were recruited via advertisements in various

Internet forums and message boards, some of them aimed at gay men and lesbians. In both countries, people were offered a chance to win lottery prizes worth up to \$100 as incentive to participate. This study was approved by the institutional review board at McDaniel College.

Design

Six independent variables were included in this 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 mixed-participants design. The within-participants variables included target sex (male or female) and target relationship status (coupled or single). The between-participants variables included target sexual orientation (heterosexual or gay or lesbian), participant sex (male or female), participant relationship status (coupled or single), and participant sexual orientation (heterosexual or gay or lesbian). The dependent variable was participants' perception of the targets measured using 20 traits.

Materials

Participants rated the targets on 20 positive and negatives traits. Each trait was rated on a 9-point Likert-type scale. Higher ratings indicated that the targets were perceived to be very high on that trait. The positive traits included happy, attractive, self-assured, independent, career-oriented, successful, motivated, emotionally close to others, spends time with friends, fond of children, fun-loving, adventurous, spontaneous, and interesting. The negative traits included immature, self-centered, shy, fearful of rejection, lonely, and envious. These are the same traits used in earlier research about perceptions of single and married people (Morris et al., 2008) with the addition of motivated and successful. The six negative traits (shy, lonely, fearful of rejection, immature, self-centered, and envious of others) were reverse-coded. Because the reliability of the 20 items was so high ($\alpha = 0.92$), a composite score was created by computing an overall mean. A higher rating indicates that the target was perceived more positively.

Participants rated their own desire to be in a long-term relationship using the following one-item 9-point Likert-type scale: "To what extent do you desire a long-term relationship?" Higher numbers indicated a stronger desire to be in a long-term relationship (range = 1–9, $M = 7.84$, $SD = 1.72$).

Procedure

Using an online survey, participants read brief descriptions of four different targets: a single man,

a single woman, a coupled man, and a coupled woman, each described as being 40 years old. Half of the participants read about four heterosexual targets and half read about four gay and lesbian targets. In addition to describing the manipulated independent variables (the target's sex, relationship status, and sexual orientation), each profile also provided some filler information about the target's job, hobbies, and place of residence. Examples of two of the descriptions presented in the U.S. survey are below.

Samantha lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and works as an accountant. She is 40, enjoys reading, and likes taking hikes. She likes eating Italian food and also likes to go on vacation. Samantha is heterosexual and is in a long-term relationship.

Jessica lives in Richmond, Virginia, and works in retail. She is 40, likes to go swimming, and enjoys listening to music. She likes to go bowling and likes to watch movies as well. Jessica is a lesbian and is single.

The Israeli survey included similar descriptions but was written in Hebrew and used Israeli first names and cities. The order in which participants read about the four target people was counterbalanced, and the filler information was also counterbalanced across each type of target so that names, hometowns, hobbies, and jobs were linked with each of the four types of targets an equal number of times. After reading each description, participants rated the target using the twenty items measuring positive and negative traits.

After rating the four targets, participants were asked to rate their own desire to be in a long-term relationship. The survey also included demographic questions measuring participants' sex, age, sexual orientation, relationship status, education, and ethnicity (in the U.S. survey) or country of birth (in the Israeli survey).

Results

A repeated-measures Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was performed with the target rating as the dependent variable. The within-participant independent variables were target sex (male or female) and target relationship status (single or coupled). The between-participant independent variables were target sexual orientation (heterosexual or gay and lesbian), participant sex (male or female),

participant sexual orientation (heterosexual or gay and lesbian), and participant relationship status (single or coupled). The single group included single, divorced, and widowed participants. The coupled group included married, engaged, and coupled participants.

Based on the results of an ANOVA, which also included country as an independent variable, the effects of target relationship status on ratings did not vary between the two countries, $F(1, 584) = 0.78, p = .38, \eta^2 = 0.001$. Because the rating patterns were similar in the Israeli and U.S. samples, the two samples were analyzed together, and country was not included in further analyses. An Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was also conducted with age of participant as a covariate, and this analysis did not change any of the significant results reported below. Finally, when analyses were conducted without including divorced, separated, and widowed people in the single group, the results also found the same patterns described below.

Perceptions of Single and Coupled Targets

A main effect of target relationship status was found. Single targets ($M = 5.52, SD = 0.96, 95\% CI [5.44, 5.60]$), were perceived more negatively than coupled targets ($M = 5.99, SD = 0.93, 95\% CI [5.91, 6.06]$), $F(1, 600) = 130.78, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.18$. This main effect pattern was not qualified by any interactions with target sex, participant sex, or participant relationship status.

Desire to Be in a Romantic Relationship

Because our hypothesis that the relatively negative perceptions of single people would be applied to gay men and lesbians was based on the assumption that gay men and lesbians strongly value being in romantic relationships to the same extent that heterosexual men and women do, we tested whether participants responded differently to the question, "To what extent do you desire a long-term relationship?" The results of a two-way ANOVA (Participant Sex x Participant Sexual Orientation) found no main effects or interactions. There were no significant differences between heterosexual men, heterosexual women, gay men, and lesbians; all four participant groups demonstrated an equally strong desire to be in a long-term relationship with the means ranging from 7.59 to 8.04 on the 9-point Likert-type scale. Interestingly, despite the fact that our participants all indicated an equally strong desire to be in a romantic relationship regardless of their sex or sexual orientation, these

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participants believed that the four groups differed in their desire for a romantic relationship, $F(3, 615) = 209.03, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.50$. Participants believed that heterosexual women had the strongest desire to be in a romantic relationship ($M = 8.16, SD = 1.18$) followed by lesbians ($M = 7.66, SD = 1.56$) and that both heterosexual men ($M = 6.60, SD = 1.82$) and gay men ($M = 6.69, SD = 1.87$) had lower levels of desire for a romantic relationship. The only groups that did not significantly differ from each other were the two groups of men.

For each participant, a difference score was computed (average ratings of coupled targets minus average ratings of single targets) to assess the degree to which participants held more negative views of single people than of coupled people regardless of the targets' sex or sexual orientation. As predicted, the more strongly that participants desired a long-term romantic relationship themselves, the more negatively they perceived single people relative to coupled people, $r = .10, p < .01$.

Relationship Status and Sexual Orientation

Although there was no two-way interaction between target relationship status and target sexual orientation, a significant three-way interaction was found between target relationship status, target sexual orientation, and participant sexual orientation, $F(1, 600) = 10.38, p = .001, \eta^2 = 0.02$. To assess the degree to which single targets were perceived more negatively than coupled targets, a difference score was created by subtracting the ratings of single targets from the ratings of coupled targets; thus positive difference scores indicated more positive perceptions of coupled targets than singles

targets. In general, single targets were viewed more negatively than coupled targets, but participants perceived the differences between coupled and single targets as being largest when they rated targets of the same sexual orientation as themselves (see Table 1). Figure 1 illustrates the interaction pattern by showing the difference scores between the way coupled and single targets were perceived depending upon their sexual orientation and participants' sexual orientation.

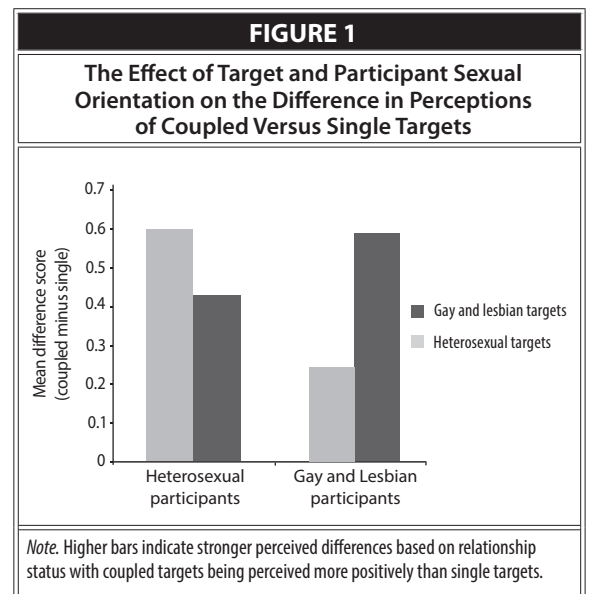
Discussion

The results of the present study supported past research demonstrating that people have more negative perceptions of single people than they do of coupled people. The relatively negative perceptions applied equally to single men and women, and participants held these perceptions regardless of their own sex or relationship status. Furthermore, this study demonstrated cross-cultural similarity in the relatively negative perceptions of single people in Israel and in the United States.

Extending past research, the results of this study indicated that the more negative perceptions of single people in comparison to coupled people apply to both heterosexual and gay or lesbian targets, and that these perceptions are held by heterosexual and gay and lesbian participants alike. Past researchers have argued that the negative perceptions of single people are rooted in a belief system that being in a romantic relationship or being married is an indication of social maturity and an ingredient in a happy fulfilling life (DePaulo, 2006). Consistent with that argument,

	Coupled		Single		Difference
	M	95% CI	M	95% CI	
Heterosexual participants					
Heterosexual targets	5.98	[5.84, 6.12]	5.36	[5.22, 5.50]	.59**
Gay/lesbian targets	6.01	[5.87, 6.15]	5.59	[5.44, 5.73]	.42**
Gay and lesbian participants					
Heterosexual targets	5.79	[5.62, 5.95]	5.53	[5.36, 5.70]	.24*
Gay/lesbian targets	6.17	[6.01, 6.32]	5.59	[5.43, 5.75]	.58**

Note. $F(1, 600) = 10.38, p = .001, \eta^2 = 0.02$. All of the difference scores (coupled minus single) were significantly greater than zero indicating more positive perceptions of coupled targets compared to single targets. ** $p < .001, *p < .01$ for the difference between coupled and single targets.



the findings from the present study indicated that people are especially likely to have more negative perceptions of single people than coupled people if they have a strong desire for a long-term romantic relationship themselves. Given that the gay and lesbian participants in this study were just as likely to desire a romantic relationship as the heterosexual participants, it is perhaps not surprising that they were also just as likely as the heterosexual participants to have more negative perceptions of single people than coupled people.

However, it appears that people perceive the difference between single and coupled people to be considerably larger when they are judging targets who are of the same sexual orientation as themselves. For example, heterosexual participants were more likely to view single people more negatively than coupled people when they were judging heterosexual people. Likewise, gay and lesbian participants were more likely to view single people more negatively than coupled people when they were judging other gay men and lesbians. One possible explanation for this finding is that people are particularly likely to have relatively negative perceptions of those who have not achieved the type of relationship status that they desire for themselves, whether it be a heterosexual or same-sex relationship. Because gay men and lesbians desire to be in same-sex relationships and heterosexual people desire to be in heterosexual relationships, the positive perceptions of coupled people may be particularly positive when those people are in the types of relationships that participants desire to be in themselves.

Although it may be possible to apply concepts from evolutionary psychology to explain this pattern among heterosexual people, it is more difficult to apply evolutionary psychology to explain the pattern among gay men and lesbians. Pillsworth and Haselton (2005) applied concepts from evolutionary psychology to explain the existence of negative perceptions about single people. They argued that relationship status may be interpreted as a cue to someone's mate value, particularly as they get older. For example, if someone has no past romantic relationship history or has been unable to maintain a relationship, others may assume that the person is somehow flawed and unworthy of consideration as a potential mate. People may be more attuned to the relationship status of people of their own sexual orientation because it is particularly adaptive to pay attention to people of one's own sexual orientation, either because

they are potential mates or they are potential sexual competitors. If relatively negative perceptions of single people exist because relationship status is perceived as a cue about the mate value of potential partners and competitors, heterosexual people should judge single heterosexual people more negatively than coupled heterosexual people regardless of sex because their potential romantic partners are of one sex and their sexual competitors are of the other sex. However, if people only perceive single people more negatively than coupled people when those single people are potential partners or competitors, it would be expected that gay men would have more negative perceptions of single gay men than coupled gay men but that their perceptions of lesbians would not vary by relationship status because lesbians are neither their potential partners nor competitors. Likewise, lesbians would be expected to view other lesbians according to their relationship status, but not gay men. In our results, however, there were no interactions with sex; gay men and lesbians had more negative perceptions of gay and lesbian single people than coupled people, regardless of the target's sex.

Perhaps another explanation for our results can be drawn from work on the outgroup homogeneity effect (Park & Rothbart, 1982). According to this theory, people view their own ingroups as quite diverse and heterogeneous, although they view outgroups as having far less variability among people. Essentially, people tend to think outgroup members are all fairly similar to each other. Brauer (2001) has documented that the outgroup homogeneity effect occurs among people from both high and low status groups regardless of whether they are judging outgroups of high or low status. Perhaps, heterosexual men and women perceive other heterosexual people as part of their ingroup, and gay men and lesbians perceive each other as both belonging to a marginalized shared sexual ingroup. Given that individuals are more likely to recognize the diversity of their ingroup than their outgroups, they may be more likely to perceive differences between single and coupled people of their ingroup. Because people tend to think that outgroup members are all fairly similar to each other, they may not make important distinctions between the personality traits of single versus coupled people from an outgroup. Whether targets are coupled or not may be much more likely to affect people's perceptions of them if they are part of the perceivers' ingroup rather than their

outgroup. These results were consistent with Park and Rothbart's finding that people are more likely to encode ingroup behavior in ways that take into account the subgroups within the ingroup whereas they encode outgroup behavior in ways that primarily focus on the superordinate group membership. Of course, this explanation of our findings is somewhat speculative and relies on the assumption that gay men and lesbians consider each other members of a shared marginalized sexual identity ingroup. There is at least some evidence that this may be the case among gay and lesbian members of activist organizations; gay men and lesbians may develop a collective identity if their stigmatized identity based on their sexual orientation is made salient (Van Dyke & Cress, 2006).

Although our results found a main effect for the target's relationship status but not a main effect for the target's sexual orientation, this does not necessarily mean that perceptions about people are more strongly based upon relationship status than sexual orientation. The lack of a main effect for sexual orientation in our study was most likely due to the dependent variables we chose to measure. The specific traits used in this study were chosen as a measure of stereotypes found in past research about relationship status (e.g., unhappy, immature, lonely, and self-centered). The stereotypes about single people are not the same as the stereotypes about gay men and lesbians. For example, gay men are thought to be fashionable, feminine, artistic, and melodramatic (Madon, 1997), and lesbians are thought to be butch, athletic, and feminist (Geiger, Harwood, & Hummert, 2006). Therefore, the scales used in our study would not have captured the stereotypes associated with sexual orientation. Instead, the characteristics measured in this study were chosen to assess the stereotypes of single versus coupled people.

Because gay men and lesbians do not have the legal right to marry in Israel and only had that right in certain U.S. states at the time this study was conducted in 2011, our study focused on perceptions based upon relationship status rather than marital status. However, future research conducted in places where gay men and lesbians can legally marry could explore whether gay men and lesbians are perceived more positively if they are married than if they are coupled and if gay and lesbian single people are perceived even more negatively when legal marriage is an option.

Future research could also examine whether bisexual people are perceived more positively if

they are coupled or married than if they are single. It is possible that the effect of relationship status on the perceptions of bisexual adults may depend upon whether they are in a relationship with someone of their own or the other sex. However, the current study did not include data that would allow a test of that hypothesis.

Although single people were viewed more negatively than coupled people in this experiment, the average ratings of single people were still above the midpoint of the scale. This pattern indicates that perceptions of single people are not extremely negative, but are significantly more negative than the perceptions of coupled people. This pattern is consistent with past research that has found that single people are perceived relatively negatively compared to married people while still being perceived somewhat positively in general (Hertel et al., 2007; Morris et al., 2008). However, the relatively less positive perceptions of single people are low enough to lead to discrimination against single people.

In addition to the fact that single people are perceived more negatively than coupled people, there is also some evidence that heterosexual single people face discrimination based on their marital status. In a series of experiments about housing discrimination, rental agents and other participants expressed a strong preference for leasing properties to married couples over single people (Morris et al., 2007). In this case, the discrimination was based upon marital status rather than relationship status because newlywed married couples were even preferred over unmarried cohabiting romantic partners who had been together much longer. Most participants who chose the married couple reported that they based their decision upon the marital status of the applicants, and discrimination based upon marital status was rated as significantly more acceptable and legitimate than other forms of discrimination (Morris et al., 2007). A field experiment conducted in Canada provided further evidence of housing discrimination against single people by showing that landlords prefer renting to heterosexual couples than to single parents (Lauster & Easterbrook, 2011). Several researchers have documented marital status discrimination in salaries by showing that married men earn higher salaries than single men even when controlling for levels of seniority and job performance (Antonovics & Town, 2004; Bellas, 1992; Keith, 1986; Toutkoushian, 1998). Some have argued that single people may face discrimination when attempting to have

children through adoption or in vitro fertilization (Millbank, 1997). There is also some evidence that single people face discrimination in social aspects of their lives. Single adults often feel that their married friends have abandoned them (Amador & Kiersky, 1998), and this perception is supported by research showing that married couples tend to prefer to socialize with other married couples (Verbrugge, 1983). When single people are asked to describe instances of differential treatment based on their relationship status, they are most likely to mention experiences of financial disadvantage, unfair treatment in the workplace, social exclusion, and comments implying negative perceptions about their lives (Morris, 2005). However, none of the past research about discrimination based on marital or relationship status has focused on gay men or lesbians. Although the current study was the first to examine how perceptions about single people are applied to gay men and lesbians, future research could address whether gay men and lesbians who are coupled receive more positive treatment than gay men and lesbians who are single.

The present study extended previous research about single people by exploring whether the more negative perceptions of single people than coupled people apply to gay men and lesbians in the same way that they apply to heterosexual men and women. Gay men and lesbians continue to be an underrepresented, understudied group in social psychological research. Early research about romantic relationships initially focused entirely on heterosexual people, but recent research has now shown much similarity between heterosexual, gay, and lesbian relationship dynamics (Brashier & Hughes, 2012; Conley, Roesch, Peplau, & Gold, 2009; Cusack, Hughes, & Cook, 2012; Roisman, Clausell, Holland, Fortuna, & Elieff, 2008). Similarly, the study of single people has needed to expand to include sexual orientation as an important aspect of relationship status. Our study was the first to show that the relatively negative perceptions of single people compared to coupled people apply to gay men and lesbians in the same way that they apply to heterosexual people, and that people have stronger perceptions about relationship status when they are judging people who share their sexual orientation.

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