

AGING HORIZONS BULLETIN

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Interview: Choosing the Single Life

[Bella DePaulo](#) is a leading thinker on the single experience. She recently told the American Psychological Association, "It is time for a more accurate portrayal of single people and single life — one that recognizes the real strengths and resilience of people who are single, and what makes their lives meaningful."

To learn more, **AHB** reached Dr. DePaulo at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Ruth Dempsey: Your book *Singled Out: How Singles are Stereotyped, Stigmatized, and Ignored, and Still Live Happily Ever After*, spawned an ongoing and important exploration of the single life. How do you think things have changed over the past decade?



Bella DePaulo: Among the biggest changes are the demographic ones. The number and percentage of single people keeps rising. There are now about 109 million unmarried people in the United States. That's 45 per cent of the adult population.

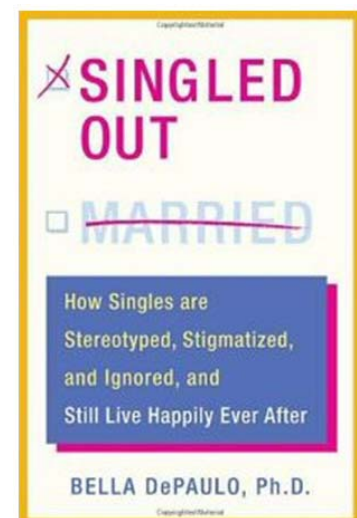
The rise of single people puts pressure on societies to change in ways that recognize the important place of single people.

For example, businesses start offering deals and products and services that single people want. Political candidates may start feeling the need to speak to them, rather than just talking about marriage this and family that. I think it is also harder for stereotypes to persist as the number of single people continue to grow.

But there are countervailing forces as well. The rise of single people, especially the rise of single people who are happily single and who *choose* to be single, is threatening to people who want to believe that married people are better than single people, and that the only way to be truly happy is to be married. So there is some backlash, as well.

In fact, I think that a lot of the "matrimania" (the over-the-top celebration and hyping of marriage, weddings and coupling) that we see is happening not because we are so secure about the place of marriage in our lives, but because we are so insecure.

RD: You have concerns about the way science portrays single people. What is the main issue?



BD: The vast majority of studies on marital status were designed to learn about marriage and married people. Single people are only included as a comparison group. So we don't really have a science of single life yet. We mostly just have a science of marriage.

Also, the kinds of claims that are made — getting married makes people happier and healthier for example — cannot be supported by the kinds of studies that are conducted. And, the results of even the best studies do not provide the kinds of support for the marriage benefits that we have been led to believe are there.

RD: In an address to the American Psychological Association's Annual Convention (Aug. 5, 2016), you cited research findings that challenged the idea that single people are less connected and generous than married people.

BD: Single people are more connected to parents, siblings, friends and coworkers than married people are. And when people marry, they become more insular.

For example, when other people need the kind of care that can go on for months, single people are there. A representative national sample of 9,000 British adults found that more single than married people had regularly looked after someone for at least three months who was sick, elderly or disabled.

Also single people are more engaged in the life of the cities and towns where they live than are married people. For example, they participate more in civic and public events and in the arts, and they are more involved in informal social activities.

The repeated claim that single people experience greater loneliness than married people lacks good evidence. In fact, studies show that it is hard to find a group of people less likely to be lonely in later life than women who have always been single.

Single men are more generous than married men. This is from research that included just men. In *Singled Out*, I looked at research that suggests single men contribute more to the workplace in ways that benefit more than just themselves.

Also, single people are just as concerned with guiding the next generation as married people are.

RD: Another study suggests single people are likely to experience more personal growth than married people.

BD: That's right. In an analysis of data from the *National Survey of Families and Households*, more than 1,000 people, who had always been single, were compared to more than 3,000 people of comparable ages, who had been continuously married. There were two ways in which the lives of the people who stayed single changed over time, compared to those who stayed married.

First, single people experienced more personal growth.

Second, people who stayed single, rather than those who stayed married, also reported increases in autonomy and self-determination.

It strikes me that strong internal standards and the sense of continued personal growth over the course of our adult years are important dimension of a meaningful life. They are experiences that increase over time if you stay single, more so than if you stay married.

To be clear, this study does not show that staying single *causes* people to experience more autonomy or personal growth. It only establishes a link between the two.

RD: What about the benefits and protections that come with marriage?

BD: They are considerable. In the United States, the most important ones are probably the more than 1,000 benefits and protections written right into the federal laws.

To start, lifelong single people pay into social security throughout their working lives. Yet, they cannot designate a recipient of their benefits after they die. That money goes back into the system.

In contrast, married people can receive each other's benefits. Also, couples have access to tax breaks that single people do not.

Single people do not have the option of getting health coverage under a spouse's plan. They lose out on discounts on products and services that are available only to couples. When traveling, they may be required to pay the dreaded single supplement.

And in everyday life, married people are advantaged by the relentless celebration of marriage, while the lives of single people are marginalized.

RD: Writing in *Psychological Inquiry* (Vol.25. Issue 1,2014), you argue it's time for "single studies" similar to women's studies and other similar academic programs. Why so?

BD: First, we have so little cultural awareness of "singlism" — the stereotyping, stigmatizing and discrimination against single people. With no awareness, those prejudicial and unfair practices continue with no apology and no push-back.

Second, without a single studies program, it is hard for people to learn about the science and scholarship of single life. Studies and books and articles are dispersed across many disciplines. We need a way of bringing them together and sharing them with generations of students. If there were single studies programs, then there would also be faculty positions for scholars who want to focus on single life. As it is, there are marriage and family programs in many universities, but so far as I know, there is not even one single studies program anywhere in the world.

Perhaps most importantly, single studies programs would help us establish a rigorous science and scholarship of single life. It would be a way of learning about single people systematically, rather than relying on stereotype and opinions.

Single studies programs would also encourage the development of scholarship that takes the perspective of single people. As it is, what we know about single people too often comes from studies in which single people are the comparison group in studies that were designed to learn more about marriage.

RD: Final thoughts?

BD: Live your single life fully, joyfully and unapologetically!

Study: Rugby Bonds Older Men in Taiwan

The Old Boys are pretty fast, especially given their oldest player is 83 years old.

"Almost each of us got certain kind of scars either on the leg or face or somewhere else, but that doesn't matter, we just keep going," said one Rugby player with a laugh.

In a study, published in *Leisure Studies* (April 11, 2015), researchers have found that Rugby offers men a haven of friendship and a way to keep mentally and physically active in their later years. Another major motivator is love of the game.

The study was based on interviews with 15 players from a "golden oldie" Rugby union club in a northern region of Taiwan. Men ranged in age from 54 to 83 years of age. Most of the men continued to work full or part-time.

The research team included Eva (Hui-Ping) Cheng from National Taipei University (New Taipei City, Taiwan), Shane Pegg from the University of Queensland (Brisbane, Australia) and Robert Stebbins from the University of Calgary (Calgary, Canada).

Friendship

The club, dubbed affectionately the "old boys", was exclusively for players aged 50 years and older and for those who just refuse to quit playing.

The 65-year-old former coach of the Taiwanese national Rugby union team launched the Old Boy's club with a few key members.

Many of the players first met at university. "I've known "Rod" and "Denny" since we played on the varsity Rugby team," one player remarked. "although we are now busy with work, we catch up here on Sunday afternoon."

Most of the men started playing Rugby at the age of 18 and have continued to play the sport for 40, 50 and even 60 years.

As "Mike" remarked "Now we play the game just for fun, not caring about win or lose. Once we can continue to play, we are happy."

The study showed that Rugby held a special place in the lives of a number of the men, providing them with a strong source of personal identity and meaning.

Besides, for these men, Rugby created lifelong friendships and a sense of belonging. As 83-year-old "Sam" put it succinctly, "One day, a Rugby boy, all my life a Rugby man, and yes, no matter how old I am, I will continue to play it!"

Health benefits

In addition to friendship, the players touted the health benefits of playing Rugby. For one thing, it motivated them to keep moving and physically active. It also kept them mentally sharp. As Robert remarked: "It's not just physical effort but the more important thing is you have to use your brain, you have to think about the strategies, it's teamwork."

"Matt" said that he was glad to have played Rugby when he was young noting, "Rugby is a sport that teaches me the spirit of never give up and sportsmanship, it helps me to face life with toughness of mind, and most important of all, the wisdom."

Rugby is a tough sport that demands a high level of skill. To reduce risks of injury, the old boys have implemented certain constraints. For example, players wear different coloured shorts. Players aged 70 to 79 wear yellow, while those aged 80 to 89 wear purple. The adaptive rules extend to forms of tackling. Players over 60 years of age cannot be tackled, for instance.

The study found that players used Rugby to show that they are still able to maintain a sense of control over their bodies and their Rugby skills, rejecting the notion that aging is synonymous with inability.

Commitment to the game

Rugby was first introduced into Taiwan in 1913 by the Japanese. Today, Taiwanese males still engage in Rugby as a leisure activity.

The men in the study played Rugby in the 1970s and '80s, when the game was an important national sport in Taiwan.

"Back then, just those who were good at academics could join the varsity team Rugby union," one 63-year-old participant said, "You gotta keep good grades and fight well in the game . . . we were so proud of ourselves."

Players have retained strong bonds with Japanese players, self-funding trips to Japan for friendly matches, at least once a year.

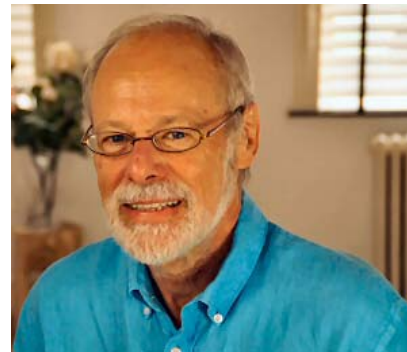
Looking down the road, the study found players eager to promote the game of Rugby to the wider public, and to pass on their legacy to a younger generation of players.

Today, the old boys use social media to disseminate information about their beloved sport. Periodically, they invite university and high school players to compete with them in social games.

Interview: What Makes Life Precious

The prospect of dying has always fascinated and haunted human beings. Today, scientists are talking about treatments that could expand average life spans by decades or may even outwit mortality.

On the other hand, philosopher Jan Baars says we have exalted longevity over what makes life worth living. He draws on the works of Plato, the Stoics and Epicureans among others. Baars explains that knowing that one will die soon is what makes life precious and meaningful.



His article Aging: Learning to Live a Finite Life appeared online in The Gerontologist on June 22, 2016

AHB reached Dr. Baars at the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht, the Netherlands.

Ruth Dempsey: Your work offers a philosophical lens on aging. Why is this important?

Jan Baars: To start, philosophy has an impressive 2500-year long tradition of thinking about issues that are relevant for human aging. Issues such as time, happiness, suffering, virtue and self-realization. These issues, of course, are important for people of all ages, but they assume a special edge as people reach their later years.

Indeed, philosophy was originally a search for a *good life* in communities of teachers, students and friends.

However, aging as such, has not been an important subject of philosophical debates. After Cicero's famous work *On Old Age* (44 B.C), it took more than 2,000 years before the next major philosophical work on aging, appeared. *La Veillesse* by Simone de Beauvoir was published in 1970. The English translation entitled *The Coming of Age*

appeared in 1972. Even when you search in philosophical handbooks or encyclopedia under aging, you will find nothing. However, I found that if you continue to search, you can find fascinating texts, both old and new.

This is something that I have done for 30 years. The result of my quest is the book [*Aging and the Art of Living*](#). In this volume, I use philosophical inspiration to critically confront contemporary theories and practices of aging, especially instrumental approaches to aging and time that distort experiences of growing older.

RD: However, death has been a constant theme of philosophical discussion. Is that right?

JB: Yes, death has been discussed continuously throughout the millennia. And these texts are fascinating, many focusing on living life instead of merely preparing for death.

The reason that so much was written about death was that well into the 20th century, many people were dying when they were still young, so death was closer to people of all ages.

Today, people are living longer. However, this remarkable development has sparked little interest in what these new horizons of aging might add to our lives. This is what led me to write *Aging, Learning to Live a Finite Life*.

RD: So what can we learn from the Stoic and Epicurean ways of living with death?

JB: Both have their own way of living with death. The Epicureans' advice is to forget about death because you will never encounter it: as long as you are alive, death is not there and when death arrives, you will not be there anymore. This, however, is too easy. Somebody who lives a very long life will encounter death many times, through the loss of friends, partners, children, possibly grandchildren.

Therefore the Stoics have a better answer: get acquainted with death and live every day of your life as if it were the last.

Indeed, awareness of our mortality encourages us to savour the richness of the present moment.

RD: In your work, you analyze how our culture extends life and at the same time empties old age of meaning.

JB: This is true. As individuals live longer and people die mainly in old age, the typical vulnerabilities of life such as disability and disease have been driven out of "normal" adult life that has become increasingly burdened with the next agenda item.

The result is a staggering inability to appreciate what it means to live a finite life and an inability to identify with those who remind us of this condition. But we do not die

because we have become old, but because we have been born as finite human beings: death is given with life.

RD: Many of the changes you describe have occurred in your own lifetime. . .

JB: That's right. These developments have taken place in a very short time.

I grew up in a house on the main street to the local cemetery. Every time a funeral came by — initially with horses that were covered in black drapes, later with impressive, slowly driven black cars with curtains — everybody would stop at the side of the road and men would take off their hats. It made a huge impression on me. It was also kind of scary, but the message was of great dignity in death.

Now funeral cars are occasionally noticed because they are holding up traffic. Practices dignifying death and respected for centuries have practically disappeared in a few decades.

But this development is about more than changing funeral practices.

It means that life beyond an increasingly hectic adulthood becomes residual, less important. This drains aging of its meanings and threatens the dignity of what I call "finite life": a life that inevitably encounters limitations. These limitations have to do with death but also disappointments, broken hopes and failing health.

These aspects of life are driven out by a culture that emphasizes only success and overflowing agendas.

Our culture fails to appreciate aging as an inspiring source of lived experience and wisdom.

RD: You call for an art of aging that is based on each person's uniqueness and inspired by an acceptance of vulnerability.

JB: This is important, because persons are unique in their upbringing, relationships, employment, major life events and experiences. As people grow older, this uniqueness grows more complex. That's why it is unwise to generalize about people of a certain age.

The second point is vulnerability. For me, vulnerability is deeply connected with experiencing what is essential in life.

Everything that is really precious in life is vulnerable. Life cannot flourish without vulnerability. We feel the need to protect our children and our loved ones, but we cannot put them behind concrete walls.

Indeed, at a certain point, the thought that everything should be controlled becomes a destructive illusion.

To fully appreciate situations or even fleeting moments of fulfillment, we need to be open and this includes vulnerability.

RD: Your point reminds me of the late Leonard Cohen's letter to his dying muse Marianne Ihlen, who died in Norway on 29 July, aged 81:

Well Marianne, it's come to this time when we are really so old and our bodies are falling apart and I think I will follow you very soon. Know that I am so close behind you that if you stretch out your hand, I think you can reach mine. And you know that I've always loved you for your beauty and your wisdom, but I don't need to say anything more about that because you know all about that. But now, I just want to wish you a very good journey. Goodbye old friend. Endless love, see you down the road.

JB: What a beautiful way to express what it can be to live a finite life.

This moving text expresses in a poetic way a strong sense of realism about our destiny as finite beings: we shall die and fall apart.

The acceptance of this condition does not lead to bitterness but to mutual attachment and feelings that death is a destiny we share. Expressing words of deep friendship and love during life, not only after it, can create a bond that continues after the other has died.

Life is seen as a shared journey that changes but continues after death.

Study: Let's Dance!

"Liz" is in love with ballroom dancing. "I tell my daughter if I die on the dance floor, do not be sad you know that I will have died happy," she said with a laugh.

Regena Stevens-Ratchford, a sociologist at Towson University (Towson, Md., U.S.) has examined the meaning of ballroom dancing in the lives of older people.

Published online in *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development* on June 9, 2016, the qualitative study used data obtained from 20 adults living in the community. The 12 females and eight males ranged in age from 60 to 84.

The new research found that leisure, social interaction and well-being are the among the main reasons men and women dance in their 60s, 70s and 80s. But mostly, they love to dance.

Dance as leisure

Participants in the study had been doing the foxtrot, swing and rumba for at least 10 years. Some had been dancing for 30, 40 and even 65 years.

Stevens-Ratchford found most of the dancers were retired and driven to improve their dancing skills.

The majority were involved in two to six dance activities a week, requiring from seven to 12 hours of their time. Five of the participants took several classes each week, honing their skills in waltz, tango and samba.

The dancers talked about the thrill of learning a new cha-cha pattern, and the time and effort required to learn new skills.

"I am always struggling to reach the next level," one dancer explained. "That is the motivation of it: to do better and better, which makes it meaningful."

She added, "Then when you get it and when you do it well, you feel on top of the world!"

Social Life

Dancing brings people together, creating a culture of inclusiveness where participants share common interests and meet new friends.

"Mona" explained it this way:

I enjoy the social aspect of ballroom dance, getting to know more people. When we went dancing the other night, I met some new people who really found [that dancing] was fun. We had something in common. . . . These were people I probably would not have met otherwise.

Another dancer derived similar enjoyment from her dancing. "I go out every Wednesday night to dance," Liz said. "I have been doing this since my husband died. . . . In dancing, I do not make acquaintances; I make friends."

In short, for these older adults, dance provided social activities that fostered social connectedness and promoted vibrant living.

Well-being

Previous studies have shown that dancing promotes both emotional and cognitive well-being. This was also true for this group of dancers.

For instance, "Steve" described the cognitive challenge associated with learning a new routine:

I have a difficult time memorizing a whole routine and keeping it there, but the formation we did last year [included] 80 different steps and we did it. I think I could do it today because we practiced it so much. We memorized it.

For "Nina," dance provided an outlet for everyday stress: "When we are dancing, I do not think about other things that might be a worry. It is an escape."

Other participants talked about the power of dance to enhance feelings of positive well-being. As Mona put it, "The way I feel when I dance, it gives me feelings of self-worth and good health and just enjoyment."

Moreover, the study revealed that even physical challenges such as arthritis failed to deter some dancers. "I dance just because it is so enjoyable," one woman said. "Sometimes when I dance, my husband has to help me off the floor because I am in so much pain, but when I am dancing I do not feel the pain."

Roundup

FIGHTING AGEISM: A recently published book, *This Chair Rocks: A Manifesto Against Ageism* aims to help do for ageism what Betty Freidan's *The Feminine Mystique* did for the women's movement.

Ashton Applewhite's manifesto is a feisty, vital and well-researched call to arms.

The book's nine chapters deal with the brain, the body, sex, work, the need for community and the end of life. The author and activist draws on her interviews with 50 adults aged 80, and older and her personal experience.

Applewhite challenges us to imagine a better world by shifting the conversation around longevity from:

- deficit to opportunity
- dependence to interdependence, and
- burden to gift.

But *This Chair Rocks* is also a consciousness-raising document. This powerful tool catalyzed the women's movement in the '60s and '70s. You can download the author's free booklet "*Who Me, Ageist? How to Start Your Own Consciousness-Raising Group*" [here](#).

AT LONG LAST, A SONGWRITER WINS A NOBEL: At 75, Bob Dylan has won the 2016 Nobel Prize for Literature "for having created new poetic expressions within the great American song tradition."

Sara Danius, the permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy, compared Dylan's work to that of ancient Greek writers Homer and Sappho.

In an interview with the *Daily Telegraph*, after the award, the singer said:

Everything worth doing takes time. You have to write a hundred bad songs before you write one good one. And you have to sacrifice a lot of things that you might not be prepared for. Like it or not, you are in this alone and have to follow your own star.

IT JUST GOT REAL "Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

– Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit*

LUNCH PROGRAM GARNERS RAVE REVIEWS: An innovative social eating program dubbed "eating with friends" has older Australians, cheering.

Funded by the former Home and Community Care Program, the program has been operating for 15 years in Tasmania, Australia. It has grown from one suburban group to more than 30 groups spread across the state.

Researchers from the Centre for Rural Health at the University of Tasmania recently evaluated the program from the perspective of participants. The study included six groups from rural and urban areas.

The findings appeared in the September 2016 issue of the *Australasian Journal on Ageing*

Older adults gave the program top marks. Here's why.

- **Fosters social relations:** As one participant noted, "The people here are absolutely kind and thoughtful, everybody is friendly."
- **Serves low cost delicious meals:** "I cook my own meals so it's nice to have a meal out," one woman remarked. "The food is always different. . . . it would cost a fortune if you had it at a restaurant," another added.

- **Offers a sense of ownership:** Individual members shape the activities of the group. For example, some groups meet on the weekend instead of during the week. Some meals are three courses, others two. And wine is an option in one group.
- **Provides easy access** to meal locations.

Still work to do

Perhaps unsurprisingly, researchers found the key challenge for both rural and urban groups is finding suitable, affordable transport for those who needed it.

Finally, we at *Aging Horizons Bulletin* want to wish all our wonderful readers many blessings in 2017! — *Ruth Dempsey*