

WHO REMAINS CELIBATE?

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Summary. Who are the men and women who are single in their mid-30s? This study, which uses life history data for a British cohort born in 1946, shows that an important minority are ‘handicapped’ and these adults are cared for primarily by their families, in particular by elderly parents. Celibates tend to be more introverted, ambitious and to have older marrying parents than their ever-married peers. Single women differ from single men. The women are more likely to be of higher ability, to be graduates and to be in high status occupations whilst single men are more likely to be members of the lowest social class or unemployed. The great majority of single people live either with their parents or on their own.

Introduction

Attitudes and values about the primacy of marriage as a way of life have been the focus of much discussion and speculation over the last decade (Study Commission on the Family, 1982; Mount, 1982). The view that bachelors and spinsters are in some sense deviant or residual groups appears to have weakened. The imperative to marry, at least at young ages, has also weakened and the perceived advantages of marriage over celibacy, the never-married state, also appear to have declined. Prior to marrying, young people have increasingly developed alternative means of achieving the psycho-sexual and economic functions of marriage without contracting a marriage; pre-marital coitus is virtually the norm nowadays (Bone, 1986), and cohabitation has emerged as an alternative or precursor to marriage (Brown & Kiernan, 1981). However, the scant data available suggest that the majority, over 90%, of young people still expect to marry (Guy, 1983; Kiernan, 1986). Whether these expectations will be fulfilled, or whether legitimate structural alternatives to marriage will emerge, cannot be established until young people have passed through their twenties into their thirties.

Here, using data from the MRC’s National Survey of Health and Development, a longitudinal study of a sample of a cohort born in 1946 (Douglas, 1976; Atkins *et al.*, 1981), the attributes of men and women who were still single in their mid-30s are considered against the background of trends in celibacy over the course of the twentieth century.

Trends in celibacy

Table 1 shows the proportions of men and women who were still single at exact age 35 for cohorts born since the beginning of this century. Amongst women, there have been some dramatic changes. Around one-fifth of women born in the first decade of the century were unmarried by the time they reached their mid-30s; their chances of marrying were reduced owing to the extensive casualties amongst men in the 1914–18 war. Women born in the 1910s and 1920s were increasingly likely to have married. The proportions single at age 35 fell from 18% amongst the cohort born in 1911 to just over 10% amongst those born in 1926. Further declines are seen for the cohorts born in the 1930s and 1940s reaching a level of 5% for the 1946 cohort. The changes amongst the men have been less dramatic, with the proportions still single having fallen from around 17% for the cohorts born in the first two decades of the century to 11% for those born in the 1940s. These developments are due to a variety of factors (Kiernan & Eldridge, 1985). Some arise from changes in the sex structure of the population. In the inter-war period there was a deficit of men in the prime marriageable ages but in the period since the Second World War there has been a shortage of single women. Several factors have affected the balance between the sexes. Mortality, which previously claimed more young men than women has declined, such that the biologically determined excess of males at birth is not now eroded until late middle age. Differential emigration rates, which were quite pronounced in earlier decades of this century, no longer significantly reduce the sex ratio at young adult ages. Increase in the popularity of marriage over time has also led to reductions in the proportions of both men and women remaining single.

Amongst the cohorts born this century, the cohorts born in the 1940s had the

Table 1. Proportions (%) never married by exact age 35 among cohorts of men and women born 1901–46

Birth cohort	Men	Women
1901*	17.5	22.7
1906	16.1	20.8
1911	17.7	18.3
1916	16.1	15.3
1921	14.9	12.7
1926	14.0	10.5
1931	12.2	7.7
1936	11.1	6.6
1941	11.1	6.2
1946*	10.7	5.2
1946 NSHD†	8.8	5.9

Source: *1901–46 OPCS *Marriage and Divorce Statistics*.

† National Survey of Health and Development.

lowest proportions still single at age 35. Life history data for the 1946 cohort sample are used here to ascertain the characteristics that distinguish unmarried men and women from their married contemporaries and to investigate whether the attributes of single men and women are similar or different. The data for the men in the cohort sample are not in accord with the data derived from registration statistics. An exact match was not expected, in view of the substantial differences in the information used to generate these two sets of data, but the discrepancy is such as to suggest that our data for the men may be biased. Consequently, the results may not be generally applicable to the population at large.

Findings

Characteristics of single men and women

Marriage was undoubtedly the norm amongst the 1946 cohort. Only 4.6% of the women ($N = 93$) and 8.4% of the men ($N = 171$) were not married at the most recent contact in 1982, when the sample was aged 36 years. These men and women had deviated from the social norm of marrying in young adulthood. Some may marry later in life or never. Some may be described as 'involuntarily single' in that they are physically or mentally handicapped. Amongst the single men and women in this cohort, 14.6% ($N = 25$) of the men and 21.5% ($N = 20$) of the women had had special education provision as children, which indicates some degree of physical or mental impairment that may have lessened their probability of marriage. This is not to say that those who attended special schools did not marry; four out of five of these men and women married. But, those who remained single may be those with more severe handicaps. Also, this educational criterion does not include those who developed physical and mental health difficulties in later life, which may have lessened their chances of marrying.

Carter & Glick (1970) observed from their analysis of United States census

Table 2. Educational attainment of men and women by marital status at age 36

	Men		Women	
	Single %	Ever-married %	Single %	Ever-married %
Special education	15	6	22	4
No qualifications	18	21	9	30
O-level or equivalent*	21	25	28	37
A-level or equivalent	15	18	18	15
Advanced non-degree	13	15	10	9
Degree	18	14	13	5
<i>N</i> (100%)†	165	1807	90	1883

* Includes sub-O-level qualifications.

† Due to rounding, columns do not always add exactly to 100%.

Table 3. Family-of-origin characteristics of single men and women*

Characteristics	Men			Women		
	%	<i>N</i>		%	<i>N</i>	
Parents' school leaving age†						
Mother						
16 or younger	7.0	1599		2.6	1572	
17 or older	12.0	150		13.9	151	
	<i>P</i> < 0.04			<i>P</i> < 0.0001		
Father						
14 or younger	6.6	1145		2.0	1179	
15 or older	8.8	537		7.0	525	
	<i>P</i> = NS			<i>P</i> < 0.0001		
	Mean	SD	<i>N</i>	Mean	SD	<i>N</i>
Parents' age at marriage						
Mother						
Single at 36	23.3	4.4	124	24.4	4.3	60
Ever-married	22.3	3.8	1522	22.4	3.9	1623
	<i>P</i> = 0.01			<i>P</i> = 0.009		
Father						
Single at 36	26.6	5.0	124	27.1	5.0	60
Ever-married	25.2	4.8	1527	25.4	5.1	1629
	<i>P</i> = 0.001			<i>P</i> = 0.009		

* Excludes men and women who had special education.

† Children whose mothers left school at 14, 15 and 16 had similar probabilities of being single; children whose fathers left school at 15 or older had similar probabilities of being single.

NS = not significant at 5% level.

statistics that one of the best supported generalizations about persons who remained single is that they include a higher percentage of persons in the lower and upper extremes of the educational distribution. Our findings tend to support this generalization, but more so for women than men. In Table 2, men and women are grouped by whether they received special education and, for the others, by their level of qualification. A greater proportion of single women as compared to ever-married women are in the handicapped group, 22% as compared with 4%, and a greater proportion are graduates, 13% as compared with 5%. A greater proportion of single men as compared with the married are also found in the handicapped group, 15% as compared with 6%. It is not so clear for the men, that greater proportions were graduates.

In the following sections the salient family of origin, personal and socioeconomic

Table 4. Personality characteristics by marital status at age 36*

Characteristics	Men			Women		
	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N
Neuroticism score at age 16						
Single	5.2	3.5	122	6.2	3.7	59
Ever-married	5.1	3.5	1454	7.0	3.5	1582
	<i>P</i> = NS			<i>P</i> = 0.07		
Extraversion score at age 16						
Single	7.4	2.9	122	7.1	2.7	59
Ever-married	8.3	2.6	1454	7.8	2.8	1582
	<i>P</i> = 0.0002			<i>P</i> = 0.09		

* Excludes men and women who had special education.

characteristics that distinguished the celibates from their married contemporaries are discussed. The analyses exclude the distinct group of men and women who required special educational provision.

Family of origin and personality influences

Table 3 shows that men and women who were single at age 36 had parents who, on average, had married at older ages. This emphasizes again the influence of parents' marriage behaviour on that of their offspring (Kiernan & Eldridge, 1987). Amongst women, the important influence of having a highly educated mother is shown; 14% of the women who had mothers who had left school at 17 or later were single as compared with 3% of the women whose mothers had left at younger ages. This influence is less pronounced for the men, but still of some importance. Women whose fathers had left school after the minimum school leaving age were also more likely to be single, whereas level of father's education was only weakly related to the probability of sons being single.

There is evidence (Table 4) that both single men and women had, on average, lower scores on the extraversion dimension of the short form Maudsley Personality Inventory, which they completed when they were aged 16 (Eysenck, 1958). Thus, it appears that the never-married tend to be more introverted than their married contemporaries. There was no evidence to suggest that single men and women were more neurotic (the other dimension included in the MPI) than the married. On the contrary, single women as a group tend, on average, to be more stable than their married contemporaries.

Socioeconomic characteristics

Table 5 shows that there was little difference in the probabilities of men being single according to educational level. For the women it is noticeable that the most

Table 5. Ability and ambition scores by marital status at age 36*

Characteristics	Men			Women		
	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N
General ability score at age 11						
Single	51.5	10.2	121	56.5	9.0	56
Ever-married	52.1	9.2	1506	53.3	9.3	160.1
	<i>P</i> = NS			<i>P</i> = 0.01		
Ambition score at age 15						
Single	52.3	9.4	115	53.8	10.6	54
Ever-married	50.3	10.1	1476	50.1	9.9	1539
	<i>P</i> = 0.04			<i>P</i> = 0.007		

* Excluding those who had special education.

NS: not significant at 5% level.

highly educated women are more likely to be single: 12% of the graduates were still single as compared with 4% of those with other qualifications. Women with intermediate qualifications included those with O-level, A-level and higher non-degree qualifications, all of whom had similar probabilities of being single. The findings concerning level of ability, derived from a general ability test given at age 11, which approximated an IQ test (Douglas, Ross & Simpson, 1968), and celibacy also reveal interesting associations, but they tend to be in the opposite direction for men and women. Amongst the women, the single group had higher average ability scores than the married group, whereas single men had, if anything, lower scores than the married, but this difference could have arisen by chance. It is also noteworthy that the average ability scores of single women are substantially greater than the average scores for single men; this is when men and women who had special education provision, who are likely to have low ability scores, are excluded. If these men and women are included, the relationship between ability scores and celibacy remains similar in terms of direction for both sexes, but the difference between, for example, the average scores of single and married women is less and statistically not significant. For social class at age 36, again there are differences between the sexes. Women in higher social classes, particularly SCI, are more likely to be single than those in the lower social classes (IV, V). Amongst men, it is those in the lowest social class (SCV) and those who were not working (two-thirds of whom were unemployed) who are most likely to be single. Finally, as compared with their married peers, both single men and women, on average, had higher ambition scores during adolescence. The ambition scores were derived from the Rothwell Miller Interest Blank given to the sample members at age 15 (Cherry, 1974).

The pattern of greater celibacy amongst women of higher ability, education and

Table 6. Educational and social class characteristics of the never-married*

	Men		Women	
	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>
Level of highest qualification				
None	7.2	416	1.4	575
Intermediate†	7.1	1129	4.2	1197
Degree	10.3	290	12.0	100
	<i>P</i> = NS		<i>P</i> < 0.0001	
Social class at age 36				
Professional I	9.1	176	16.7	18
Intermediate II	7.7	546	10.7	291
Non-manual IIINM	7.4	163	5.9	387
Manual IIIM	7.3	425	9.7	62
Semi-skilled IV	9.6	114	1.7	175
Unskilled V	23.1	13	0.0	52
Not working	34.1	85	1.2	583
	<i>P</i> < 0.0001		<i>P</i> < 0.0001	

* Excluding those who had special education.

† Includes all other qualifications.

NS = not significant at 5% level.

occupation (Table 6), which is of long standing (Freeman & Klaus, 1984; Cookingham, 1984), may be interpreted in several ways. There may be greater pressure on higher status women than on comparable men to avoid 'marrying down', causing more of these women than men to remain unmarried. It may be due to selectivity in the marriage market, in that women with such endowments may be regarded as less desirable partners or be rejected as suitable marriage partners. Men may have preferences for wives of lower or equal status but not higher. Alternatively, rather than being rejected, these women may be a self-selected group. They may choose to develop their careers rather than combining them with marriage and its frequent consequence of motherhood. Such explanations are hypothetical as there is no evidence, as yet, which would allow assessment of their relative contributions.

There can be little doubt that the men and women of this generation who were still single in their mid-30s were, relatively speaking, different in terms of socioeconomic characteristics. Finding an homogamous never-married mate, of approximately the same age, is likely to be more difficult for single persons in their thirties who wish to marry than for those in their twenties, who have a larger pool of eligible partners on which to draw. However, with the growth in divorce in recent decades the marriage market has become more flexible, and more single people are marrying divorcees. For example in 1985, 13% of spinsters married a divorced man as compared with 6% in 1971 and 4% in 1961. The older that women (and men) are at their first marriage, the

more likely it is that their spouse has been married before. One in three of the never-married women marrying in 1985 at ages 30–34 took a divorced spouse, whilst one in five of those who married at ages 25–29 and one in ten of those who married at ages 20–24 did so (OPCS, Annual *Marriage and Divorce Statistics*).

Living arrangements

Table 7 shows the distribution of living arrangements at age 36 for single men and women. The two most common household patterns were living with parents or living alone. Altogether, 49% of the single men and 39% of the single women were living with parents at age 36, and 32% and 37% respectively were living on their own.

As the household circumstances of people who had special education provision as children are likely to differ from those who did not, the men and women are divided into two groups. For convenience the group that did not receive special education is referred to as the 'normal' group, and those who had such provision as the 'special' group.

Amongst the normal group, more of the women than the men were living alone, 45% compared with 36%, and more of the men than the women were living with their parents, 46% as compared with 36%. It is likely that men and women with greater financial resources are more likely to be living separately from their parents. This cannot be measured directly, but additional analyses showed that the men and women who were living alone were more highly educated than those who were living with their parents. Seventy-four per cent of men living alone had qualifications of A-level standard or above as compared with 42% of those living with their parents. The analogous proportions for the women were 70% and 38% respectively. Moreover, the majority of those living alone were buying their own homes: 75% of the men and 79% of the women.

Of those who were living with their parents, 59% of the men and 56% of the women were living with a lone parent; the remainder were living with both parents. As expected, given higher male mortality more (three out of four) of those living with one

Table 7. Living arrangements of never-married

Living arrangements	Men			Women		
	Normal	Special*	All	Normal	Special*	All
Alone	35.6	12.0	32.2	45.2	5.0	36.6
Lone parents	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.1	0.0	3.2
With partner	8.9	4.0	8.2	8.2	0.0	6.4
With parents	45.9	64.0	48.5	35.6	50.0	38.7
With relatives	5.5	0.0	4.7	0.0	15.0	3.2
With non-relatives	2.1	0.0	1.7	4.1	5.0	4.3
Institution	2.1	20.0	4.7	2.7	25.0	7.5
Total (100%)†	146	25	171	73	20	93

* Group who had special education as children.

† Due to rounding, columns do not always add exactly to 100%.

parent were living with a lone mother. However, men and women were not equally likely to be living with a lone mother. Of those who were living with a lone parent, two-thirds of the men were living with a lone mother as compared with 87% of the women. It appears that living with a lone father is a more common practice for sons than daughters.

Single men and women who are living with their parents in their mid-30s are likely to include some who lack the resources to live independently; for example, 25% of the men living with their parents at age 36 were not in employment. Some prefer to live with their parents and others have remained, or returned, to care for elderly parents. There is no direct information on the reasons why these men and women live with their parents, so the proportions that fall into these and other categories cannot be assessed. But, it is likely that some of these single persons are living at home as carers for, or companions to, their parents. To test this, albeit crudely and indirectly, the group that were likely to have the resources to enable them to live alone, the highly educated group with A-level and above qualifications, were studied. One in five of the daughters who were living alone had a widowed mother as compared with two out of five of those who were living at home. There was no such indication for the analogous groups of sons: one in three of those living alone and of those living at home had a widowed mother. It is well established that women play a greater role in informal care and support than men (Townsend, 1957; Parker, 1985).

Child-free cohabitation and consensual unions are minor components in the living arrangements of these single people. Table 7 shows that similar proportions of men and of women were cohabiting (8–9%) and additional analyses show that only one in six of these couples had co-resident children. Only a small minority of the single women were lone mothers (4%). Just over 2% of the men and 4% of the women were sharing with non-relatives and less than 3% of both sexes were living in institutions, which includes hospitals, religious communities and prisons. Judging from the experiences of this cohort, the normative living arrangements of single persons in their mid-30s are living alone or living with parents.

In the special group, the majority are living with their families. Sixty-four per cent of these men were living with a parent and 65% of the women were living with either a parent or a relative, primarily siblings. The remainder were mainly living in institutions. It appears from these data that the care of these handicapped adults still largely rests with their families, in particular with parents who themselves are getting on in years. For example, the average age of mothers who had co-resident handicapped daughters was 71 years, with a range from 62 to 80 years. The caring responsibilities within families with elderly parents are not necessarily uni-directional, from the junior to the senior generation. In special cases, like the care of the handicapped, the responsibility can operate in the opposite direction.

Conclusion

This study has shown that an important minority of single persons are handicapped. It has also revealed that, compared with the married, celibates tend to be more introverted and to have parents who married at later ages. Single men and women at age 36 appear to differ from one another in a number of ways. For example, higher

ability, education and occupational status were associated with celibacy to a greater extent amongst women than men.

This cohort of people, and the 1940s generation as a whole, passed through their prime nubile ages when a regime of early and prevalent marriage was operating. Marriage was nearly universal and seemingly inevitable (Kiernan & Eldridge, 1987). With the emergence of cohabitation and a later age pattern of marriage, more of later born cohorts may not have married by their mid-30s. Thus it may become increasingly important to distinguish between different dimensions of the never-married state, including cohabiting and visiting unions as well as the more traditional group of bachelors and spinsters. Later born generations will also include greater proportions of more highly educated women which may also have repercussions for the marriage market. It will be interesting to see to what extent those who remain single differ from those who did so in this cohort.

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