

# WHY PEOPLE PREFER TO BE SINGLE: VOLUNTARY SINGLEHOOD AND EXPERIENCES WITH RELATIONSHIPS

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## ABSTRACT

Not having an intimate partner is a common state in contemporary post-industrial societies. A substantial proportion of singles are voluntarily so that is, they prefer not to be in an intimate relationship. The current study aimed to examine whether past relationship experiences predicted voluntary singlehood. More specifically, using a sample of 629 Greek-speaking participants, we found that most voluntarily singles had other priorities, followed by those who had been disappointed by intimate relationships. We also found that, more negative past experiences with relationships, were associated with an increased probability to fall in the latter group than in the other groups of voluntary singlehood or being mated.

SINGLEHOOD  
VOLUNTARY SINGLEHOOD  
PAST EXPERIENCES WITH RELATIONSHIPS  
MATING

KEYWORDS

29 WHY PEOPLE PREFER TO BE SINGLE  
30 THE CURRENT STUDY  
31 METHODS  
32 RESULTS  
33 DISCUSSION



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# DLACZEGO LUDZIE WOLĄ BYĆ SINGLAMI: BYCIE SINGLEM Z WYBORU I DOŚWIADCZENIA W ZWIĄZKACH

## ABSTRAKT

Brak intymnego partnera to częsty stan we współczesnych społeczeństwach postindustrialnych. Znaczna część singli jest samych z własnego wyboru, co oznacza, że wolą nie być w intymnych związkach. Obecne badanie miało na celu sprawdzenie, czy przeszłe doświadczenia w związkach przewidywały dobrowolne bycie singlem. Na próbie 629 greckojęzycznych uczestników odkryliśmy, że większość dobrowolnych singli miała inne priorytety, a następnie, grupę singli stanowili ci, którzy byli rozczarowani intymnymi związkami. Odkryliśmy również, że bardziej negatywne doświadczenia z przeszłości związane ze związkami wiązały się ze zwiększonym prawdopodobieństwem wpadnięcia w tę drugą grupę niż w innych grupach dobrowolnego stanu wolnego lub pozostawania w parze.

## SŁOWA KLUCZOWE

samotność, dobrowolna samotność, przeszłe doświadczenia ze związkami, łączenie się w pary

### Author Note

We have no know conflict of interest to disclose.

## INTRODUCTION

A considerable proportion of adult population in contemporary post-industrial societies is single that is, not in an intimate relationship (Klinenberg, 2012; Ortiz-Ospina, 2019; Wang & Parker, 2014). Some of the singles are involuntarily so, while others prefer not to be in an intimate relationship (Apostolou & Wang, 2019). Recent efforts have attempted to examine which factors predict each state of singlehood (e.g., Apostolou & Patsiarika, 2022). The current research aims to contribute to this literature by examining whether past experiences with relationships are associated with the probability to prefer to be single. We will start developing our argument by examining the reasons why people prefer not to be in an intimate relationship.

### WHY PEOPLE PREFER TO BE SINGLE

Humans are a sexually reproducing species, which means that, in order to procreate they need to gain sexual access to members of the opposite sex. Yet, this is usually not sufficient for successful procreation, because human children require considerable, reliable and prolonged parental investment in order to reach sexual maturity (Kim et al., 2012; Lancaster & Lancaster, 1987). This fact has favored the evolution of a long-term mating strategy, where individuals establish lasting relationships and invest heavily to their children (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000). Accordingly, across different cultures and different times, the vast majority of people enter in such relationships that frequently take the form of marriage (Coontz, 2006). Even so, many individuals experience spells of involuntary or voluntary singlehood. For instance, one study employed a sample of 7,181 participants from 14 different post-industrial nations, and found that about 13% of the participants indicated that they were involuntarily, and more than 15% indicated that they were voluntarily single (Apostolou et al., 2023).

Given the evolutionary importance of being in an intimate relationship, it seems at first puzzling that many people prefer not to be in an intimate relationship. It has been argued that individuals are likely to prefer to be single in order to develop their qualities and become thus, more desirable as mates (Apostolou, 2017). In particular, in a long-term mate, people value being educated, having a good job, being well-off, and enjoying high social status, as these traits are associated with a good capacity to provide resources, which in turn, is crucial for supporting a family (Buss, 2016; Thomas et al., 2022). These traits are not innate, but can be developed during an individual's lifespan. Yet, doing so usually requires committing substantial resources such as time and money for a prolonged period of time. For example, getting a good education is costly and time-consuming. Similarly, advancing on one's career, requires effort and commitment. On the other hand, finding an intimate partner and keeping an intimate relationship also require allocating considerable resources. Thus, in certain circumstances, it could pay for people not to enter in the mating market, but divert instead the bulk of their resources in developing their qualities, and return to the mating market at a later time, having better chances to attract high quality mates. Consistent with this hypothesis, one study employed a combination of qualitative research methods, asking participants why they were single, and found that common reasons included "Worry that a relationship is going to be damaging for my career," "I have different priorities," "To focus on my career," and "To be free to chase my own goals" (Apostolou, 2017).

In addition, it could be the case that by being single, people reap fitness benefits through allocating the resources that would otherwise go to mating effort, to their genetic relatives (see Wilson, 1975, 1978 for a similar argument for the evolution of homosexuality).

Furthermore, Conroy-Beam et al., (2016) have shown that relationship satisfaction is predicted, not simply by mate preference fulfilment, but whether there are better alternatives. Similarly, Buss et al. (2017)'s mate switching hypothesis suggests that people are sensitive to alternative options when deciding whether to leave a current relationship. In this respect, people may choose to be single or not on the basis of the available alternatives.

Moving on, finding a partner requires allocating considerable resources such as time and money to improve one's looks. Similarly, keeping an intimate relationship requires considerable resources such as time to devote to a partner's needs. Thus, when people find themselves in relationships that do not work, and consequently end, they forgo all the investment they have allocated in finding and keeping their partner. They also suffer an opportunity cost, which equals the benefits they would get by being with a more suitable mate, and they did not by staying with their current one. Overall, when a relationship ends, people would find themselves in a fitness-compromising position: They forgo all the investment they have allocated to the relationship, while they lack an intimate partner. This scenario would trigger, negative emotions, punishing individuals for being in a situation that does not increase their fitness.

In particular, emotions are adaptations that motivate fitness-increasing actions meaning, actions that increase individuals' chances to have their genetic material represented in future generations (Tooby & Cosmides, 2008; see also Nesse, 2019). In particular, emotional mechanisms generate positive emotions such as happiness and pride when individuals find themselves in situations that increase their fitness (e.g., get a job promotion) that motivate the repetition of actions that have led to this outcome (e.g., keep working hard to be promoted). On the other hand, they generate negative emotions such as sadness and disappointment that punish people when find themselves in a fitness-decreasing situation (e.g., getting fired) in order to motivate them to take action to correct the situation (e.g., find another job), and not to find themselves in a similar situation in the future (e.g., find a job that fits better their qualities). In the context of the end of a relationship, in one study, participants were provided with scenarios related to breakup, and they were asked to identify the emotions related to this event (McCarthy et al., 1997). They reported negative emotions including disgust, unfriendliness, anger, frustration, and contempt.

Moreover, we hypothesize that these negative emotions would motivate people to take some time off the mating market, contemplating on what went wrong, so as not to repeat the same mistakes. Consistent with this hypothesis, in the study on the reasons for being single, participants frequently reported: "I am afraid that I will be disappointed," "Due to bad experiences from previous relationships", and "I am afraid that I will get hurt again" (Apostolou, 2017). A different study, analyzed responses to a Reddit thread on the question "Guys, why are you single?" (Apostolou, 2019). One of the most frequent category of responses was the "Bad experiences from previous relationships" that included items such as "My last relationship ended so badly I never want to be in one again," and "Because my last relationship was toxic as hell and now I avoid relationships to prevent being hurt that badly again."

## THE CURRENT STUDY

Previous research has produced evidence, which is in accordance with our hypothesis that negative relationship experiences would lead people to prefer to be single. However, although this evidence is consistent with this hypothesis, it is insufficient to test it. One reason is that, it was based on qualitative studies, where participants may had been single for different reasons, but they justified their singlehood in terms of past relationships. For

instance, people may face difficulties in attracting mates, but instead of admitting it, they pass the blame to past mates and negative relationship experiences. Thus, what is needed is to measure past experiences with relationships and relationship status, investigating if there is the predicted association between the two, which is the purpose of the current study.

Moreover, as discussed in the previous section, voluntary singlehood is not a homogenous group, as people may prefer to be single for different reasons (see Girme et al., 2022). Our study, aimed to distinguish between those who prefer to be single in order to focus on accomplishing different tasks and those who prefer to be single because they have been disappointed by previous relationships. We predict that, past experiences with relationships, would predict membership in the latter category. In addition, a secondary objective of the current study is to examine the occurrence of the different types of voluntary singlehood.

## METHODS

### PARTICIPANTS

The study was conducted at a private university in the Republic of Cyprus, and has received ethics approval from the institution's ethics committee. Participants were recruited by promoting the link of the study on social media (Facebook, Instagram, Twitter), and by forwarding it to students and colleagues, with the request to forward it further. Participation was on a volunteer basis, and no compensation was given. The only requirement for participation was to be at least 18 years old. In total, 692 participants took part; however, for the purposes of our research, we included only participants who indicated that they had prior relationship experience. Thus, our sample consisted of 629 (377 female and 252 male) Greek-speaking participants. The mean age of women was 35.7 ( $SD = 11.5$ ) years, and the mean age of men was 37.9 ( $SD = 11.5$ ). With respect to relationship status, 21.0% of the participants indicated that they were "Involuntarily single", 20.3% "In a relationship", 19.9% "Prefer to be single", 18.8% "Married", 16.9% "Single between-relationships", and 3.2% "Other".

### MATERIALS

The study was in Greek, was created using Google forms, and consisted of two parts. In the first part, participants were asked to indicate their experience with previous relationships. For this purpose, we developed a four-item instrument (see Appendix A) that participants had to rate in a five-point Likert scale: 1 – Strongly disagree, 5 – Strongly agree. Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .86. A higher average score indicated more negative experiences with past intimate relationships. In the second part, participants were also asked to indicate their demographic information, including sex, age, and whether they had been in an intimate relationship before (Yes/No).

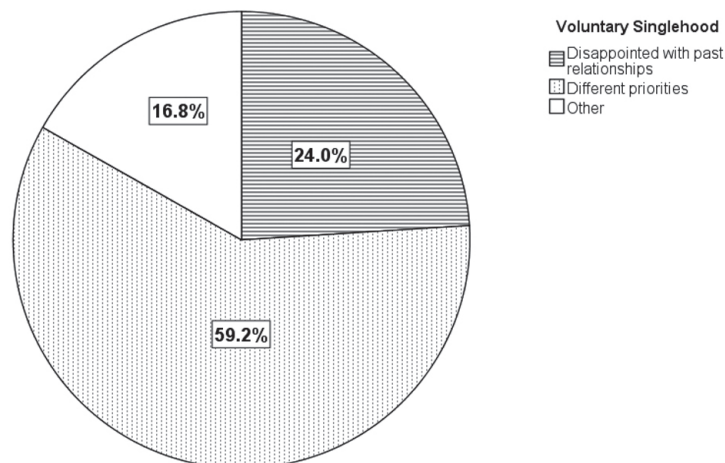
Relationship status was measured using a previous instrument (Apostolou & Wang, 2019), which included the following categories: "In a relationship," "Married," "Involuntarily single: I want to be in a relationship, but I find it difficult to attract a mate," "Single between-relationships: My relationship has recently ended and I have not yet found another partner," "Prefer to be single: I am not interested in being in a relationship," and "Other." Participants who indicated that they preferred to be single, were subsequently asked to indicate the reason why. The following three options were provided: "I have been disappointed with relationships and prefer to be single," "At the moment I have other priorities and I don't have time for relationships," and "Other."

## STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

Based on participants' answers, we created a relationship status variable with the eight levels: "in a relationship," "married," "involuntarily single," "single between-relationships," "voluntarily single – disappointed with past relationships," "voluntarily single – different priorities," "voluntarily single – other," and "other." For the purposes of our study, we employed multinomial logistic regression, where relationship status was entered as the dependent variable, and the average score of the past relationship experiences as the independent variable. Participants' sex and age were also entered as covariates.

## RESULTS

Initially, we calculated the percentage of participants in each voluntarily single group. In particular, 11.8% were in the "voluntarily single – other priorities," 4.8% in the "voluntarily single – disappointed with past relationships," and 3.3% in the "voluntarily single – other" group. Subsequently, we calculated the percentages of different types of voluntary singlehood separately from other categories of relationship status. As we can see from Graph 1, almost 60% of the voluntarily singles indicated that they were single because they had different priorities, 24% because they had been disappointed by past relationships, and about 17% for other reasons.



**Figure 1.** The figure above depicts the percentage of participants belonging in each category of voluntary singlehood

Moving on to the statistical analysis, the logistic regression model could not be fitted because in some categories there were very few observations. To address this issue, we dropped the "Other" category from the relationship status variable so that the model could be fitted. For this model, the Cox and Snell was .271, and the Nagelkerke was .279. The "Voluntarily single – disappointed with past relationships" was chosen as the reference category, because this type of singlehood constitutes the primary focus of our research.

The results indicated that there was a significant main effect of past relationship experiences [ $\chi^2(6, N = 596) = 76.95, p < .001$ ]. As we can see from Table 1, more negative relationship experiences were associated with increased likelihood to be in the "voluntarily single – disappointed with past relationships" category than in other categories of relationship status. As indicated by the Odds Ratio (OR), the largest effect was over being married. In particular, one unit increase in the experiences with past relationships variable (indicating

more negative experiences) was associated with a 75%  $[(1 - 0.25) * 100]$  decrease in the probability to be married than in the “voluntarily single – disappointed with past relationships” category. Similarly, with respect to the second biggest effect, one unit increase in the experiences with past relationships variable was associated with a 61%  $[(1 - 0.39) * 100]$  decrease in the probability to be in the “voluntarily single – other priorities” than in the “voluntarily single – disappointed with past relationships” category.

We can further notice that the coefficient for the involuntarily single group was not significant, indicating that past relationship experiences did not predict whether someone would be involuntarily single. In addition, we found that there was no significant interaction between the past experiences with relationships and participants' sex ( $p = .850$ ). This finding indicates that the effect of past experiences with relationships on relationship status was similar across sexes.

**Table 1. The effect of past experiences with relationships on relationship status**

Relationship status	Past experiences			Sex			Age		
	Wald	p-value	OR	Wald	p-value	OR	Wald	p-value	OR
Involuntarily single	3.16	.076	0.68	0.63	.428	0.71	0.56	.455	1.02
Single between-relationships	5.92	.015	0.58	0.01	.943	0.97	3.79	.052	1.04
Voluntarily single – different priorities	16.12	<.001	0.39	0.03	.859	1.09	0.00	.947	1.00
Voluntarily single – other	8.44	.004	0.42	4.09	.043	3.79	4.09	.356	0.97
In a relationship	12.31	<.001	0.46	0.12	.726	0.86	1.06	.303	0.98
Married	34.82	<.001	0.25	4.03	.045	0.39	16.27	<.001	1.10

*Note.* The reference category for the relationship status is “Voluntarily single – disappointed with past relationships.” The reference category for the sex is “women.”

## DISCUSSION

We found that, in our sample, about one in five participants was voluntarily single. From those who preferred to be single, about one in four were so because they had been disappointed by previous relationships. Moreover, we found that experience with romantic relationships was a significant predictor of relationships status, with more negative experiences to be associated with increased likelihood to be voluntarily single.

Consistent with the evolutionary theoretical framework and empirical findings in the area (Girme et al., 2022), our results indicate that the voluntarily single group was not homogenous, but people preferred to be single for different reasons. The most common one was in order to prioritize on achieving other goals. Yet, about one fourth of the voluntarily singles, indicated that they were so because they had been disappointed by previous relationships. In addition, about 17% percent indicated that they preferred to be single for other reasons, suggesting that the voluntarily single group could be further divided. However, because this is the first attempt to examine the occurrence of the different subcategories of the voluntary single group, and because our study was based on a non-probability sample, more replication studies are needed in order to get a better idea about how voluntary singlehood is distributed.

Consistent with our hypothesis, people who had bad experiences with past relationships were more likely to be prefer to be single. In qualitative studies, people frequently indicated that they were single because they had negative experiences from past relationships (e.g., Apostolou, 2019). As discussed in the introduction, it could be the case that people were single for other reasons, but chose to justify their singlehood on the basis of bad experiences with previous relationships. Our findings demonstrate that this is not the case, as people

who indicated that they had bad experiences in past relationships, were also more likely to be voluntarily single.

Moving on, in our theoretical framework, opting out from the mating market due to bad relationship experiences, is a fitness-increasing strategy because it would enable individuals to work on what went wrong and make better future choices (Apostolou, 2017). This being the case, people would not prefer to stay single forever, but the emotional wound would eventually heal, and they would choose to reenter the mating market at a later time, a prediction that future research needs to test. There is also the possibility that the emotional wound is such that people may choose not to reenter the mating market at all, or delay doing so for a very long time. This choice would have a potentially large negative effect on one's fitness, so we predict that such instances would be rare, a prediction that future research needs also to test.

One limitation of the current study is that it was based on a non-probability sample, so its findings may not readily apply to the population (but see Coppock et al., 2018). Similarly, our research was conducted in the Greek cultural contexts, and its finding may not generalize to different cultural settings. In addition, our study is correlational thus, causality can only be indirectly inferred. Moreover, we found an association between past experiences with romantic relationships and voluntary singlehood. Yet, additional variables need to be considered if this association is to be better understood. In particular, variables such as personality may predict past relationship experiences. This being the case, personality or other variables could have an indirect effect predicting voluntary singlehood through predicting past relationship experiences.

Similarly, because bad experiences from previous relationships do not affect everyone the same way, future research should look at the moderating roles of coping strategies, hopefulness, mating options, perceived mate value) and so on. This work could possibly lead to the development of possible interventions. Future studies could also attempt to make a more refined categorization of singlehood, taking into consideration other subgroups like the incels (see Costello et al., 2022).

Our findings indicate that people prefer to be single, predominately in order to focus their attention on aching different goals, but also because they have been disappointed by past relationships. They indicate further that membership in the latter category, is predicted by past relationship experiences. However, more replication and extension studies are needed in order to understand this association.

## APPENDIX A

Below is the instrument developed to measure past experiences with relationships. In order to find the score for each participants, questions "2" and "4" need to be reverse-scored, and all the items to be summed and be divided by four.

1. Please indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with the following statements:
2. My previous partners had hurt me
3. I had good experiences from my previous relationships
4. My previous relationships were traumatic
5. My experience with my previous relationships was more positive than negative



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