

KRISTIE COLLINS

# THE MARGINALIZED MAJORITY



**MEDIA REPRESENTATION AND  
LIVED EXPERIENCES OF SINGLE WOMEN**

PETER LANG

# Introduction

## The Single Scoop: Researching singleness and femininity

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Welcome to the age of un-innocence. No one has Breakfast at Tiffany's and no one has affairs to remember. Instead, we have breakfast at 7am, and affairs we try to forget as soon as possible. Self-protection and closing the deal are paramount. Cupid has flown the co-op. How the hell did we get into this mess? There are thousands, maybe tens of thousands of women like this in the city. We all know them and we all agree they're great. They travel, they pay taxes, they'll spend \$400 on a pair of Manolo Blahnik strappy sandals. And they're alone. It's like the riddle of the sphinx: Why are there so many great unmarried women, and no great unmarried men?<sup>1</sup>

In the summer of 2000, the August issue of *Time* magazine carried a feature article and accompanying cover photo, which placed female single-ness at the forefront of topical issues for the new millennium. The glossy cover photo featured a large image of the four female lead actors from the HBO (Home Box Office) cable series *Sex and the City* with the bold, sensationalized title, “Who Needs a Husband?” The four women on the front page stared back at the reader, exuding self-confidence, success, and sex appeal. The photo seemed clearly meant to imply that these women—whether single *or* married—were in need of nothing. Directly and openly meeting the reader's gaze from the cover of the magazine, the four single women seemed to challenge us to ask them this question, a question apparently meant to spark controversial reactions. And yet, nearly four decades after the emergence of the first female, single-centred series, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, had we not moved past an era where a woman's self-worth was tied to marital status? What angle of the “single woman” story could still earn the coveted cover status with *Time* magazine at the turn of the millennium?

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1 Voiceover narration by Carrie Bradshaw, “Sex and the City”, Season 1, *Sex and the City* (Home Box Office, 1998).



*Time* magazine cover,  
August 2000

The “catch” to the article was quickly made apparent—while the title trumpeted the irrelevance of marriage to the “modern” single woman, the text in the sidebar asks the reader the *real* question: “Are they happy?” A denial to this rhetorical question seems implicit and inevitable, evident in the very asking and framing of the question, and, once again, female singleness is relegated to a second tier social status and life course trajectory in contrast to the “ensured” happiness and fulfilment presumably enjoyed by married (or, in the context of this article, non-single) women—a socially constructed discourse which ultimately and unfairly polarizes and pigeonholes both married and single women.

That *Time* magazine poses this outmoded and by now seemingly stale question as to whether single women can “truly” be happy undermines the sense of agency in these four female characters—and the pride in identifying with these proud-looking women. What informs the question is the implicit equating of single with being alone—or lonely—and the likening of female singleness to incomplete womanhood (seen in connotations

of “lack” evident in terms such as “*unmarried*” and “*childless*” which are widespread in the literature on, and media representations of, single women), which denigrate the social contributions made by these single women in *Sex and the City* and belittle the value gained in scores of their mediated lived experiences. Nonetheless, these long-standing and unfortunate perceptions of female singleness as “defective” or “pitiable” simply do not reflect the lives of the four single, female characters from *Sex and the City*, nor the lives lived or the choices made by great numbers of single women today.

This dissonance in and between media constructions of (female) singleness, social perceptions of (female) singleness, and the lived experiences of actual single women clearly begs further investigation and urged me to pursue a critical study of social constructions and lived experiences of female singleness. From the advent of second wave feminism in the 1960s—which precipitated the emergence of pivotal female, single-centred media texts—to the apex of female singleness in *Sex and the City* at the turn of the millennium, the discourse on single women has followed a political, social and cultural progression which poses questions worthy of closer attention. Questions such as how have representations of single women in North American media evolved? How do audiences comprised of single women receive, interpret, and employ these media representations of female singleness in the construction and maintenance of their identities in couple-centric cultures which privilege the (heterosexual) marital relationship? Is (female) singleness experienced and perceived differently in distinct localities? And, is singleness constructed and managed in different ways by never-married and previously-married women at various stages of the life course?

By addressing these and other related questions, this book proposes to undertake a study into what might be termed “female singleness studies.” While singleness and other forms of non-normative lifestyles have, in recent years, been generating academic interest—and, in fact, singleness studies courses have begun to emerge in sociology and gender studies curricula in North America and the United Kingdom—a distinct commitment to a *female* singleness studies has yet to surface in the academic terrain. However, as this book will attest, the social construction and lived experience of female singleness is inextricably linked to larger discourses on the changing nature—and importance—of feminist politics; family arrangements; economic systems; and (the expediency of) life course trajectories, and thus, “female singleness studies” clearly warrants its own discrete area of research.