A Single Group

a Study of Singles Groups
and their Growing Popularity

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Maria Ruebens has been a member of the group since 1999, two years after her divorce. She remembers how she first heard about it.

I was exercising in the pool of my apartment complex when I got to talking with a woman who had been temping at the company I work for. She mentioned that she was a member of a singles group at a church downtown. I had been going to another group that I had found out about through work, but it was a Catholic group; I’m Methodist. I went to a few meetings and found that there were a lot of people from my Catholic group that also went to the New Beginnings group. At first I enjoyed going to the movies and pool parties with all the other single people my age, now I am in the class bible study. I am an officer and even host some events at my home, something I never used to do.

Many singles report similar stories. They are newly divorced, not always ready to start dating again, but truly desiring to meet new people and form new friendships. Somewhat jaded about romantic relationships, they may enter the group seeking more support than they are getting from family and friends who just don’t identify with their single status. Before long they may notice that they feel differently about themselves and their lives. Perhaps they see themselves enjoying activities that they never had before, as in Maria’s case. These are just some of the effects of middle-aged singles groups.

Divorce and the loss of a spouse are things that many people will experience in their lifetime. Almost half of all marriages will end in divorce according to recent studies (Wang and Amato, 655). Thousands of people each year find themselves alone after divorce without the necessary tools to reshape their lives. In the last few decades many forms of dating services have come and gone as a way to relieve the stress of those reentering the dating world for the newly divorced. From personal ads to computerized dating services, newly divorced singles have sought out new ways to meet people through these services. Some have had success but many more have been disappointed by such services whose success rate tends to be less than incredible (Adelman and Ahuvia 275).
What is it then that keeps people coming back to singles groups? Why is it that singles groups around the country have numbers growing so rapidly that several can be found in almost every major city? Could it be that those who have found themselves single again in mid life desire something that only singles groups can give them?

In American society today we tend to assume that people who are not married, especially in mid-life, are strange. Yet we also see singles groups and dating services that may provide potential mates for these single people as also strange and not a conventional way to meet a mate. However, this idea exists most likely only in the minds of people who have never dealt with or had any experience with singles groups. We tend to view these groups as a place where people come to meet others to date and often overlook a much more important function of groups such as these, particularly the middle-aged singles group. Singles groups provide an excellent atmosphere for like-minded singles of a certain age to congregate and become acquainted. They contain a wealth of people with which one can make friends and develop life-long relationships above and beyond dating or marriage. Stated in these terms we can see that singles groups are not just for those looking for a dating partner, but also for companionship beyond the realm of dating.

This paper will explore a typical middle aged singles group and find out what it is that they provide to singles that makes them so valuable and so popular today. It will cover several main topics including dating, marriage, cohabitation, family, and support. It will also cover some negative aspects of singles groups and explore the differences between the long-time member and the newcomer.

For the remainder of this paper, the term “singles group” will refer to a group of
people who are all either single (never been married), divorced, widowed, or separated.

In singles groups in general, including the one studied for this paper, no married people are involved. A singles group can range from just a few members to several hundreds with branches in other areas too. Usually singles groups are centered around a particular activity that the members all enjoy and have in common such as dancing or sailing. In the case of the singles group studied, the common bond was church affiliation. Singles groups may also classify themselves by age group. Group divisions usually fall into categories of ten years such as 20s, 30's, 40's and so on. Some groups charge a fee for members to be included in newsletters and group activities, but most no longer do this. Singles groups host parties, dances, trips, outdoor activities, and many other events for the members. Often they try to hold several events within a week long period so that there will be many opportunities for members to interact and be social with one another. In this way, they are mainly social clubs that have a common hobby tying the group members together and are entirely made up of those who are not married.

In researching the subject of singles groups, I found that the amount of literature devoted completely to singles groups is lacking. Leonard Cargan states that “the unmarried represent one of the most under-researched topics in the social sciences” (Cargan, 201). It only follows then that singles groups are even more under studied than the ever rising number of singles in American society. Most of the articles and books I found dealt with the subject of dating, courtship, and other similar topics. Each usually included a small section or chapter on dating services and within this section there was a little bit of information about singles groups. What I gained from this research was the concept that what society in general perceives of singles groups and what singles groups
actually are is not really the same thing. I then turned my attention to singles groups and their members. Here is where I found the heart of what these groups really are and what purpose they truly serve for middle-aged singles.

I began with attending the functions of the New Beginnings Singles Sunday school class at a United Methodist Church in Minneapolis. I then centered my research on this group and sent out a survey, via email, to the members. I received many responses in which the group members made their feelings apparent on everything from dating and new relationships to how family and friends fit into their group involvement. Respondents were very open about their expectations of the group, what they liked and disliked about the group, and many other topics dealing with this particular group. Next I interviewed a few individuals that I knew had particularly interesting, unusual or sometimes very typical stories and included them as a way of humanizing the research.

Because the group I studied is part of a church, I was able to gain further insight into how singles reconcile morality and other Christian principles with being single and dating. While the majority of my findings center around the supportive aspect and the role of singles groups as units of friendship in the members lives, a large section is devoted to dating and other singles issues. Because I found a great deal of information in my research that dealt with the particular scenario of the middle aged single and dating, I have made this yet another focal point.

Literature Review

To give the reader a better understanding of the literature available that deals the closest with the subject of singles groups, I will begin with some background information on the research used. In researching this topic I came across many handbooks on dating.
Some provided very valuable insight into the lives of middle-aged singles, and others did not. There is a huge market for self-help type books that set about to tell the single person what is wrong with them and how they can fix these problems to become “normal”. Books such as *Dating for Dummies* and the multitude of “rule” books aim to unravel the mysteries of dating and often create more confusion than they dispel. Though I read through many of these books to understand what singles who seek this kind of advice are dealing with, for the most part I sought out a different type of information entirely.

One of the most valuable books I have used in research is *Single in a Married World: The Life Cycle Framework for Working with the Unmarried Adult* by Natalie Schwartzberg, Kathy Berliner, and Demaris Jacob. The Family Institute of Westchester preformed the research presented in this book, for a project called the Clinical Project on Singlehood. The writers of this book, a group of therapists, have sought to end the notion that those who are not married are somehow outside of the norms for society today. Instead of viewing marriage as a point on the cultural continuum one must reach to gain credibility, the writers have sought to define love as the end result.

*Single in a Married World* is broken down into life stages and how singles deal with each life stage as a single person. From the chapter entitled “Young Adulthood: The ‘Not Yet Married’ Phase” to the “Elderly Phase: Between Failing Health and Death” chapter, this book details each stage of life and the emotional aspects the single person can expect to encounter. It explores the burdens the married world puts on single people and how they cope with them. This book also deals with making and keeping friendships as a means of support instead of merely focusing on romantic relationships.
The writers stress that it is critical for people to have friends and circles of support though this does not always have to include a spouse or even a romantic partner. The writers of this book are highly critical of marriage and stress to readers that it should not be seen as the purpose of dating or the main goal in life.

Another book that held very useful information was entitled *Single Again* by Howard B. Lyman, Ph.D. This book focuses on singles after divorce or the loss of a spouse. It also gives new perspective into the lives of and advice to the newly divorced or newly single person. Lyman includes chapters on preparing for and dealing with divorce, being single and reentering the dating life, as well as remarriage. *Single Again* includes a very informative chapter on “single-again groups” and how they work. Lyman details several single again groups that he visited and referenced personally, including Parents Without Partners and several church and social groups. Although the main focus of this book is not on singles groups, the information Lyman gives about them is among the best that can be found.

In the first line in an article in the *International Journal of Comparative Sociology*, the author Leonard Cargan writes, “despite the loss of functions, the married lifestyle is regarded as the social norm.” This statement is indicative of the information found in “Stereotypes of Singles: A Cross-Cultural Comparison.” This article deals with the life of the unmarried and how the married society labels singles. Cargan focuses on the stereotypes that have plagued single people forever, giving special attention to how they differ for men and women. He states that,

Not marrying is not seen as a viable choice but as a ‘failure’ due to hostility to members of the opposite sex or lack of emotional development due to fixation on a parent or because they are losers due to immaturity, unattractiveness, or lack of skills in the ‘dating game’ (Cargan, 201).
Cargan deals with one of the most prevalent stereotypes that the modern single person has many sexual partners and is a "swinger". It is interesting that this is the first stereotype that he deals with and gives a great amount of attention to. Several books that are devoted to the subject of singles also explore swingers groups as a kind of singles group. Although the research in this paper does not combine the two and deals only with singles groups that are not for swingers, many books tie the two kinds of groups together (Godwin 165). This is only further evidence to support Cargan’s theory that there is a stereotype here even among singles researchers. Cargan points out that the idea that singles are sexually promiscuous is a stereotype only and for most singles it is not true.

The alternate stereotype of singles, according to Cargan, is that of the deficiency of a suitable mate. When singles are not thought of as swingers they are thought of as lonely people constantly seeking the elusive mate. Unable to find this person the single person is incomplete, lonely, and one to be pitied. The purpose of Cargan’s article is to find out why singles are stereotyped in this way and to see if it is possible if both stereotypes can exist in the same situation. He finds some truth in the stereotypes and some fallacies.

Another Article, Past the ‘Perfect Kind of Age‘? : Styling Selves and Relationships in Over-50s Dating Advertisements” by Justine Coupland, gives information on another type of dating method: personal ads. Coupland’s article was very useful because it explored another path that the newly single person might follow when beginning to date again. Much of the article centers around how older singles go about “selling” themselves in the dating market, an aspect that is integral in singles groups as well. Coupland explores what it is that singles are after when they advertise themselves in
personal ads, and finds out that it is often the same thing they are looking for in singles groups.

Though this article does not give much attention to singles groups, many parallels can be found between the members of singles groups and those who place personal ads. In my research I discovered that sometimes these two kinds of people overlap. Often those that place or answer personal dating ads also participate in singles groups. Coupland states that personal ads provide a way for the older single person to be very forward about the kind of person they are and what they are looking for. Personal ads in this way give the older single more control in presenting themselves to potential mates and friends than the typical singles group or dating club.

Mara B. Adelman and Aaron C. Ahuvia explore the concepts of “unconventional dating” in their article “Mediated Channels for Mate Seeking: A Solution to Involuntary Singlehood?” Adelman and Ahuvia cover various types of dating services such as personal ads, computer matching services, and third party matchmakers. They call these services “mediated channels in facilitating the searching, matching, and interacting process that bring singles together” (Adelman and Ahuvia 273). This article deals with singles groups as a kind of service that brings singles together.

Mediated channels for mate seeking were brought on by the enormous influx of singles that occurred in the 1980s. The authors explore how singles deal with this and the problems such as lack of places to meet other singles, lack of information about other singles and other problems that are continuously separating potential mates from one another. Dating services, they point out, can serve as a solution to some of the single person’s woes. Of course the single person has certain obligations as well, such as
presenting themselves accurately and following through with their responsibilities as a participant. In personal research I have found that this is something that singles in single groups struggle with as well which will be discussed further, in a latter section of this paper.

Adelman and Ahuvia also point out that an important part of finding a mate for the middle-aged single person is not always represented in dating services or in singles groups. Most singles tend to center on similar interests as the main qualities that are necessary for attraction to a potential mate. However, the authors stress that in research these are not the factors that provide for a solid relationship or even good predictors of actual attraction. Instead characteristics such as similar levels of sex drives, values, and intelligence are what prove to be “good predictors of relationship success” (279). This is particularly relevant to singles groups because most singles groups are centered around a particular hobby that members enjoy and as a rule do not emphasize sex. On the other hand, a group such as the one that is studied has a high concentration of religious people who share similar values and who are for the most part highly educated.

Another article that deals with single issues such as divorce and readjustment is Hongyu Wang and Paul R. Amato’s “Predictor’s of Divorce Adjustment: Stressors, Resources, and Definitions.” This article was very valuable in assessing the mental and social state of newly divorced single people. Divorce stressors, or difficulties that make adjusting to life post-divorce difficult, include “financial hardship, reductions in social network size, and moving.” Though all of these affect the kinds of people that join singles groups, I centered my attention mostly on social networks of the newly divorced. It gives valuable insight into what causes certain negative affects and explains why
certain types of people (with certain situations, or personality traits) may be more susceptible to these aspects of divorce and single life.

The authors conducted a study “to identify factors that facilitate divorce adjustment” using a random sample of national case on a longitudinal scale. By conducting the study in this manner, they were able to conclude whether certain factors influence divorce adjustment over a long period of time. This article was informative and helpful to the topic of singles groups because it dealt with how the newly single structure their lives after divorce. A large portion of the information centered on the necessity of support groups in recovering one’s social life after divorce. As research indicates, singles groups play a large role in helping singles adjust to life after divorce.

Method

The Survey

A survey was sent over e-mail to every member of the New Beginnings class who was on the e-mail roster for the class. Some surveys were handed out to those who do not have access to e-mail. A special Internet e-mail account was established for respondents to email their completed surveys back to. This was done to assure respondents that they would have complete anonymity. Each email, once received, was printed with the name and address of the sender deleted. Therefore all respondents were identified by age and sex only.

Questions on the survey were divided into groups by subject matter such as “You and Your Background,” “Interpersonal Relationships,” “Participation,” “Expectations,” and “The Group.” The survey also included a final essay portion asking respondents to give thoughts on their “involvement in this or any other singles groups, possibly
including what [they] would change about this group,” and “hopes for the group” in the future. All questions were open-ended and respondents were asked to give as much information as possible and to be free with their opinions. Questions were geared toward gaining both positive and negative information about singles groups from the members. Often questions asked for specific information such as number of children and how many activities members participated in per week. The survey was done to gain information about how singles group members feel about their life as singles and singles groups in general.

Results

In total 21 responses were received. From this point on when referring to the survey responses, I will use percentages. Though in no way completely representative of the sentiments of each member in the group, the number of survey responses does serve as a research sample of the members of the New Beginnings Singles group in general.

Responses varied in degrees of happiness with the group. Some respondents seemed exuberant in extolling the virtues of their group; others seemed slightly dissatisfied. In almost every instance respondents provided advice on how they thought a particular problem they had seen in the group could be resolved. None stated that they were dissatisfied enough to leave the group, or to consider another program to take the group’s place. Throughout the rest of this paper, answers to survey questions will serve as the voice of the singles group member, except where otherwise noted that information was taken from an interview or other means.

The Interviews

In studying this group one can see that there are certain themes and parallels to
other singles groups and singles in general. Whenever I encountered a scenario that seemed to be either representative of a typical singles group or singles group member or on the other hand a very peculiar instance, I investigated further. Often I would meet a member of the group who had an interesting situation. I would then interview the person to get the details of his or her story. This information is found throughout the paper. I also interviewed key figures in the group, such as the group president and officers, the founder of the group and many others. Often it was through these people that I would find out about those with stories worth investigating.

Interviews were particularly useful in getting a great deal of information and detail for each personal story or experience. Often, though, informants were not as candid as respondents of the survey were. However, such candidness was not as essential since this kind of information dealt more with facts while the survey concentrated on feelings and little factual information.

As mentioned in the Literature review section, a great deal of informative research was taken from literature on the subject of singles and singles groups. Most of this information was not flattering to singles groups, and not cohesive with the information gathered through personal experiences with the group. General statements about singles and their lifestyles, however, seemed to match what was found in personal contact with singles. For this reason, a great deal on information found in current literature on the subject is utilized in the following pages.

The Studied Group

New Beginnings began in 1984 with only 15 members. Class membership now tops 300. It was the second singles group at the United Methodist Church at that time.
Members were between the ages of 25 and 38, and most had never been married. Two members were divorced and had children. Many of the members were not natives of the area, but had gone to college there or had transferred for a job. Many were far away from family and friends.

Over the years the group has changed drastically. At first the group used to travel out of state for retreats and trips, now they mostly stay in the area. A founder of the group said that as the group gets older they are less willing to travel out of the area. Retreats are now held in the same city or in the surrounding area.

Currently the group is one of several singles groups at the church, but the only one for middle aged singles. The majority of members are in their late 40s and 50s, with very few members younger than 40. Almost all of the members are divorced, some more than once, and have children of all ages. Over the years the group has had what they call “returnees”, those who have left the group for marriage and return when they are single again.

Though the class is Methodist, they are open to members of all faiths. They have several Catholic singles, a few Jews and one Moslem, all of which are not members of the church but who participate in the class and its activities. They even have one Atheist who still enjoys and takes part in the discussions, speakers, and other Sunday school activities. New Beginnings prides itself on being a diverse group, open to all that wish to participate.

Over the 17 years that they have been active, the class has had several members marry. Once a group member gets married they usually leave the class and join one of the other Sunday school classes at the church. They are still welcome of course, and often
still attend dances and other activities as a couple. Many remain close to the group through the friendships made while they were members.

New Beginnings is centered on a Sunday school class at the church that sponsors it, but the group is much more than just a class. They are a very active group with scheduled activities every day of the week. Some of the regular activities include: dinners and happy hours at local restaurants once a week, discussion groups once a month, game nights once a month, dances a few times a year, dance lessons once a week, weekly lunch meetings, and Sunday night dinners at a members home in addition to other less regular events. Leaders in the group try to keep a busy schedule so that the members who have varying schedules will always have an activity to go to when they are free. Children are not regularly included in events but are always welcome at events that are appropriate such as pool parties and cookouts in the summer.

There are several offshoot activities that are held but are not directly a part of the New Beginnings Sunday school class. One such activity is a weekly bible study that is lead by a retired minister. The bible study includes many members of the class. It is a good example of how the class is linked to many different denominations. Until recently the study was lead by a female Methodist minister and her Disciples of Christ husband. Her husband however, passed away recently and she now leads the group on her own. A close group of friends from the class regularly participate in this weekly event and have formed a tight circle of support independent of the group itself.

Church Affiliation

A very important aspect of this group that sets it apart from other groups that are
similar in purpose is its church affiliation. By being associated with a very reputable church that has been a mainstay in Minneapolis for nearly a century, this group has a unique perspective on dating. The group itself is a Sunday school class for singles. While other groups center around a common interest such as sailing, dancing or others, the tie that binds these people together is their religious faith. Many feel that this is the most important aspect of the group and several survey respondents said that they would like the group to move in a more spiritual direction, rather than a social one. This group is like many others springing up all over the United States as churches incorporate a single persons outlook into their ministry.

While one may suppose that church singles groups would be more geared toward pairing off singles into potential marriage partners, this is not always the case. There is definitely pressure on Christian singles to ultimately get married but it is not the aim of this particular group. Instead they use the word of God and their faith to find instruction and guidance for the modern single person. Lessons and Bible teachings are selected that apply to their style of life. They have found that there is a great amount of inspiration to be gained from the Bible as it pertains to the single person’s life.

In previous times singles found themselves out of place at churches. Much like corporations that plan company picnics with the family unit in mind, churches have for many centuries placed huge emphasis on the family. As Kain states, “images of the traditional family... tend to be based on an idealized picture of the past, not today’s reality of the family” (16). One woman who is a member of this group had tried several times to get a singles group started at her church in a much smaller city which seemed to adhere to a more traditional vision of the family and the average church-attendee. When her
attempts failed repeatedly (she had the consent of the minister but no real help in getting it started), she moved away from her small town and church and joined this singles group. Her new church is of the same denomination and here, in the larger city, she has found that church leaders are very welcoming and supportive of singles groups in the church. In fact, they now have singles groups for all ages, from a college level class up through the New Beginnings class. As our culture progresses into a more singular lifestyle, churches can only benefit from the added membership singles groups bring in.

As Schwartzberg says “although more and more religious institutions particularly in urban areas are becoming aware of their single members, few are aware of what single people need to feel included” (28). At the United Methodist Church, leaders are beginning to see this. They have assigned a minister to deal specifically with singles and the growing number of singles groups that are coming about at this church.

Interpretations

Dating

Lyman suggests in his book Single Again, that men and women relate differently when they begin dating again after a divorce or death of a spouse. Women, he notes, tend to take the first date more seriously. It serves as a way of making them feel desired, feminine and more like a “whole woman again”. Many times after a divorce women tend to feel, for a short time, as though they are not attractive and have no real desire for intimacy with a man again. Usually after a while this feeling goes away and they become interested in dating and meeting new people again. After a couple of dates they begin to build their self-esteem up again and are not as uncomfortable with this second round of dating (246-247).
The very first date holds particular significance for women. Several women in this book relate that on their first attempts at reentering the dating scene, they were very vulnerable and were lucky to date men who were sensitive to this. Often they comment that they want to be treated like a lady without undue sexual advances made by their dates. If the first date goes well they are often open to more dates, and as time goes on they become more comfortable with dating in general.

Men seem to take a little bit of a different approach. Though they may also have very similar feelings, they are often desensitized to it somewhat because they typically have a more central role in beginning dating again. A man being the one who typically asks for the first date lessens his amount of uncertainty about when and how to begin dating again. Lyman points out that asking for the first date, and hence making the decision to date again is often the “biggest social hurdle” for men (Lyman 247).

With the advent of the Internet there have been many social improvements for singles. One can now avoid that first step of asking for a date by practicing their social skills on the multitude of people who seek social contact through the Internet. Numerous computer and Internet dating services offer to do the job of picking out a dating partner for the single person. While it is a newer strategy and quite a bit less conventional than meeting people face to face the internet has gained enormous popularity as a means to establishing a social network. Through the Internet singles can “extend their social networks, create virtual online communities, find prospective marital partners and even fulfill their most veiled sexual desires” (Merkle and Richardson 188).

Though one may ask why middle-aged people would even want to bother with all of the trouble of dating again, middle-aged single people date for a number of reasons.
The number one reason seems to be that society looks down on the unmarried person and even more so on the person who is not even looking for a potential partner through dating. There is an enormous amount of social pressure placed on the single person to date both by those who are married and by those who are single as well. In *Single Again*, Lyman states that the time to start dating again after a divorce or loss of spouse is when “1) you feel like it; 2) you think you should; or 3) friends suggest that you should” (248). Single people feel the pressure to at least date if they are going to go against the social norm of being married.

Another reason is one that is dealt with extensively in this paper. Single people have higher rates of loneliness than married people do. Feeling alone makes one more susceptible to depression and anxiety regarding one’s life. Often, when a person does not have many friends to form a tight circle of support, he/she will seek out a dating partner. It is in many cases seen as easier to date than to make new friends. Friends take much more consideration than the average potential date, and many choose dating as the answer to loneliness.

Singles groups are often one of the first places the newly single reentering the dating world looks for someone to date. Because they are advertised as the place to meet potential mates and other singles, they are often sought out. Of course there are many other aspects as well; such as the comfort of a large group and the shared hobbies of group members, but dating is by far the most popular reason a new person joins a group. Once a new person joins a singles group or at least becomes a regular participant they typically see the group as a great way to meet others in their same situation rather than solely a place to meet dates.
A large number of survey respondents reinforced this idea with their responses. Many concluded that the best thing about their lives that was a result of joining a singles group was that they were no longer lonely. They now had a vast network of friends that they acquired over a relatively short amount of time. Many stated that this group filled the void left by the loss of married friends once they became divorced. Instead of trying to fit in with married friends who were no longer like them post-divorce, they now had friends who shared their experience. It is conclusive that while the idea of dating may bring one to a singles group it is the large number of acquired friends that keeps members there.

Marriage versus Singlehood

When most people think of a singles group they think of a group of people who are very unhappy being single and who have joined a group in one last attempt to find a mate. Society tends to view them as groups in which everyone involved is looking for a marriage partner. In fact in Samuel Cameron and Alan Collins’ book, Playing the Love Market: Dating, Romance, and the Real World which takes an economical approach to love, the remark that all it takes to find a mate is looking in the right place (18). If they are correct then single groups should be huge grounds for potential mates, as the people are all “single and looking.” It may just be though that marriage is not what they are looking for. Seventy-five percent of the survey respondents said that they were happier being single while 25 percent replied that they were happier being married. Many answered that they would like to get married again but stressed that it was not a priority.

While some replied that they would like to get married again, given the right person in a good relationship, none indicated that marriage was their ultimate goal. Men
often gave the response that they would like to get married again if they found the right woman. Women tended to say that they would consider getting married again. A typical response was “maybe”, “possibly” and once even “probably”. One woman, when asked if she was happier being married or single replied, “given my marriage....single.” In this case it appears that singles are looking for a good relationship. If it should happen to develop into marriage, it is acceptable, but not required and not always the desired end result.

Often times, singles want to get married because they are tired of dating. As Lyman says it is often hard to distinguish between “I want to get married” and “I want to marry Sam.” This can be a source of awkwardness in the middle-aged singles group. While dating is a stressful endeavor, and often dissatisfying, singles groups of this kind alleviate this pressure. By focusing on friendship and the supportive aspect of membership, singles group members can find what they need in friends and dating may be more rewarding. This may be why members do not tend to get married very often, but we many times see dating within the group, sometimes for many years (Lyman 253).

According to Morton Hunt, continued dating, without marriage may also be a sign of something else. He says that for many men and women, dating is an end in itself. Some singles use continuous dating as a way of escaping marriage. Of course we have all heard of the ever single bachelor (and his female counterpart the spinster?), but Hunt says it goes much deeper than simply enjoying the freedom Singlehood affords. Men and women who date in this way are pursuing the “fantasy mate” (140). The mate that is so perfect that it can’t be found in any actual human being. Hunt stresses that it is not healthy to go directly from a marriage into a new relationship for obvious reasons.
Dating is helpful in this respect as long as singles are honest about their expectations and what they are really looking for in a relationship, be it romantic or friendly.

Of all the responses to the survey, only two percent answered that they had married another member of a singles group. This leads one to believe that marriage is not always what they are looking for and not always a likely occurrence with members of singles groups. Previously, information had suggested that members were willing to get married again but that this is not what they were looking for. In this case it shows us that it has only happened once for one couple within this group, and the marriage did not last. Of course there are a few other cases were it has occurred, as we will see with one couple.

Maggie and Jim had been dating for about 9 months when they decided to get married. Both had been married and divorced and have children. When the class found out they were getting married they decided to give them a “graduation party.” They held a small get together for the couple after church on Sunday with a few gifts and cards wishing them luck. Many in the class had known the couple for some time and had even dated one of the two. Though they will no longer attend the group’s functions as singles they will most likely continue to participate in some of the couple events such as dances and dinners that many other graduates of the class still participate in.

Graduates

It is interesting that the members of the class call the members who have found a mate and have gotten married “graduates.” In her book, Fresh Starts, Elizabeth Cauhape has her own definition of a “graduate.” Cauhape describes these as people who are newly single and have no plans for remarriage and often not even for dating. In singles groups
these are most often the people who have joined the group specifically for friendship and have no intentions of finding another person to date within the group. These people are often the ones who take on leadership positions within the group as a means of legitimizing their activeness and membership within the group. They often participate in many group activities but are afraid that others will think they have no right to be in the group because they never date other members. Graduates, therefore, perform many of the organization functions of the group to prove that there they are valuable to the group (68-76).

Cohabitation

In dealing with the issue of marriage, one must also address the ever-increasing popularity of cohabitation. Members were questioned about whether they have ever lived, in a romantic scenario, with a person they met in a singles group. Twenty-one percent answered that they had. Cohabitation is a much more likely and common thing than marriage between group members. Perhaps this is because we view living together nowadays as an intermediate step between dating and marriage.

It may also be that at this point in life singles have been married before an often have grown or close to grown children. In cases where the children are out of the home, singles are free to try living together to see if marriage, or just living together, will work out. As B. Holland in One’s Company states maybe it is time for singles to focus on love as the end result instead of marriage. Holland writes,

We need to stay open to the simple possibility of loving. We were told in youth that the whole point and purpose of love, the only possible excuse for it, was to set up a traditional household that becomes a working part of the social machine. Just maybe, though, love comes in other shapes usable to us, the non-traditional
unfamilied legions (qtd. in Schwartzberg 91).

For many singles the idea that marriage is the only key to domestic happiness permeates their entire social life. Some, however, have overstepped this and it is becoming more and more popular for couples to date for several years with little or no intention of getting married. Some may decide to live together and some may decide that they are content just dating.

Even though it is often thought to not be consistent with Christian principles, in Christian circles singles living together is becoming a more accepted norm. As Cate and Loyd state,

Cohabitation is likely to become an ever more common stage in the process of courtship. Recently the popular literature has emphasized the importance of learning how to ‘get relationships right’ the first time (Megli and Morgan, 1991). Cohabitation may take on increasing importance as the time to ‘test the marital waters’ and assess marital compatibility. Concomitantly, as the age at marriage continues to increase, cohabitation may become the preferred from for premarital pair bonding among those who are beyond the early adult year” (Cate and Lloyd 119).

Singles are gravitating toward living together as a means of testing whether a relationship can be taken to the next level of marriage. Though this is not the only purpose of living together. Often we see couples who have been dating for some time and living together for many years. They may have no intention of getting married but are content with living together. According to Cate and Loyd, 40% to 50% of all people will cohabitate before age 30 (Cate and Loyd 30).

Simenauer and Carroll bring up this idea in their book entitled Singles. These
authors sought to find out why so many people are now living together and whether or not it was an intermediate step between dating and marriage or possibly an end in itself. They found that respondents to their survey were divided on the issue; "Forty-three percent of single men and 48 percent of single women would live with someone because they wish to test the depths of our compatibility before marriage." The survey also concluded that, "about a quarter of men (26 percent) and a fifth of women (21 percent) would live with someone because they would want the companionship but not the commitment" (257).

While interacting with this group I discovered a couple that truly fit into the category of singles that date (and even live together) but never marry. They were leaders in the group, she the president and he a very active member and organizer. They had been dating for several years and were now living together. One thing that set them apart was that the man wanted to get married while his partner did not. I was told that she wanted him to find someone to marry but that it would not be her, because she did not want to get married. This is just an example of how couples deal with the marriage issue by sometimes living together first. In this case, however, there does not seem to be any chance of getting married.

*Family*

When beginning this project one of the main issues I focused on was how members of singles groups incorporate family into group activities and how those without families view the group as their family. Several questions in the survey were geared towards finding out this information. One of the questions dealt with holidays. Respondents were asked if they had ever spent a partial or whole holiday, such as
Christmas or Thanksgiving, with group members. The following question asked whether the respondent’s family participated as well. The objective was to find out how often members of the group opted to spend time with the group rather than with family members; a subsequent question asked just this. What the responses revealed was that among respondents many replied that they had indeed spent Holidays with group members and some even replied that they had chosen to spend time with the group rather than with family or friends outside of the group.

Even though the results confirmed that that group members often opt to spend what most would deem “family time” with the group instead of their own family, respondents shed a different light on the subject and its resulting stigma. Answers to many of the questions, as mentioned, were open-ended and therefore fostered a lot of discussion-type answers. When responding to the question “have you ever opted to participate in a group activity rather than spend time with friends or family not in the group?” one person replied “not very often”. This leads one to think that this person realizes that there is some sort of negative connotation with answering “yes” to this question. This could mean that the respondent didn’t want to simply answer “yes” and risk not accurately conveying their situation (as in yes they do engage in this sort of activity but it is not often enough to warrant answering “yes” whereas this may be an entirely accurate answer for someone who does this all of the time). However another person answered “yes, many times.” This leads one to believe that this particular person does not feel that there is anything wrong with his or her response. Thus it is difficult to gauge how group members feel about making the decision to spend time with the group over family and friends not in the group.
Yet it is still clear that New Beginnings is a very family-oriented group. One respondent complained that she did not feel that there were enough activities that included family in terms of children. She lamented that she understood that many people do not like children and may not want to be around them, but that for those who had kids, this was important. Others in the group have seen it as a place that children belong, and often bring their children along on group outings that are suitable.

In further researching the family aspect of this particular group, I asked respondents if they ever invited family or friends who were not members of the group to group activities. The replies were split in half, some had and some had not. This may be due to the fact that some do not have family close by, as answered by another question, though many do have close friends outside of the group. This sort of response, could of course be due to the fact that this is a limited group in that it is open to single people of a certain age and some may not have family or friends that meet these requirements. Therefore bringing them to group activities would not be appropriate. Still the fact that half have invited others to activities indicates a high level of family and outside friends’ interaction for this group. Overall, members of the group in average are inviting loved ones to participate in the group.

One member who is very active and well liked in the group is the perfect example of this sort of family interaction. She has a 12-year-old daughter who can often be found alongside her mother at group activities that are appropriate. The daughter is well known among group members and has a very jovial relationship with many of them. She attends church services with her mother and is a member of her own Sunday school class.
Another example of this is a set of brothers who belong to the group. Both are divorced with family in the area. They attend many functions and are quite active in the group. The older brother has a son who is mentally retarded that he often brings to church services but not really to many other group activities. Jeffery Morton joined the group in 1995. He became very active and participated in several weekly functions. Later in 1998 when his brother Alex got divorced, he convinced him to come to a few group activities too. Alex moved in with Jeffery for a while after his divorce and the two became group regulars. They now live in separate parts of the same city but are among the most active of the members and are very well liked.

Yet another example of bringing family into the group exists. There is a woman in the group who has two pre-teen children. One is a boy of about 13 and the other is a girl of 10. Both attend church services but not any other activities. They live with their mother but prefer to spend their time with their friends when she is at group functions rather than joining. The mother does not regularly join the group for lunch after church, particularly when she has her children with her. They are just another example of how singles with family, especially children, interact with the group. This particular case is somewhat irregular, as most singles with children do not feel awkward about bringing their children to any other group functions except one where they would definitely be out of place.

Support

When asked what the most important aspect of belonging to a group of this sort is, every respondent reported that it had to do with support and friendship. Thoits defines social support as “the degree to which the person’s basic social needs are gratified
through interaction with others” (qtd in Lazar and Erera 89). Some went on to discuss why the support is so important to the members and how it effects their daily lives. One woman related that what she liked best about this group was “the friendships [she had] developed and the closeness [one feels] knowing that they've been there - just like you-being widowed or divorced or even never married - [the] class is very caring”. In fact this is the idea that many in the group believe is the point of their membership in this group. Over and over again, a common response is that friendship is the most important thing about this group.

For many newly divorced or widowed singles loneliness is a major issue. As mentioned earlier, it is often difficult for the newly single person to find their place in society after a major life-changing event such as death or divorce. One finds themselves at odds with the friends and relatives that provided the main source of support for them pre-divorce. A comment I often heard was how the newly divorced feel out of place among their married friends and family. Without their spouses they don’t feel as though they belong in the same social category. As Natalie Schwartzberg points out in her book, “while financial supports, child-care arrangements, and single-parent authority issues [are] of primary concern, these newly single adults [need] to be with other singles and [reenter] the dating world” (22). New worries begin to take shape in their lives as they try to find their new place in a life that is changing in many ways. Schwartzberg et al also points out that not only do these newly single people have to juggle all that comes with being a single parent (in many cases) but they now also have to try to manage dating relationships while seeking some sort of support network (26).

It is typical for single people to feel alienated in world that places such emphasis
on marriage. It may seem that American society no longer values marriage, because as we know divorce rates are extremely high, but nevertheless singles are seen as “different”. It is necessary for them to find comfort in the company of others who are experiencing the same changes of ups and downs in single life. One respondent, when asked what they view as the very best quality of the singles group, reported that it was definitely the “support and camaraderie” she felt from being with people that were in her same situation and place in life. This particular respondent had not been a member for long, under six months, yet she already felt a great sense of fellowship with her fellow group members. She remarked several times that she did not feel her life, post-divorce would be as happy and fulfilling if she did not have this constant source of support.

Negatives

It is now necessary to delve into some of the negative aspects of singles groups, if only for the reason that so much time has been spent on the positive attributes and singles groups need to be depicted in an accurate light. While much of the survey focused on what members of the group thought about their group, questions asked for both positive and negative feedback. Most of the respondents gave replies that seemed a little obvious, and others were a little more shocking.

When asked to give five negative adjectives that described singles groups in general, the words that came up most often were “gossipy” and “cliquish”. Members of the group were said to be a little difficult to get to know and that rumors were also a problem. Several times in the survey these two ideas came up when members were trying to indicate what they disliked about the group. One person put a positive spin on this negative aspect of the group. She said that she felt that the group was very gossipy
but that it came from a very deep-rooted closeness. The group is gossipy, "like a family," she explained. In this way she justified the negative aspect by stating that the gossipy nature comes from a strong sense of family-like concern for one another that leads them to act this way.

Another question that asked the respondents to describe their first impression of the group also rendered similar ideas. One respondent replied that he questioned where he fit in and how when he first visited the group. Others replied that they got the impression that the group was "like a clique [they] couldn’t get into" and that they felt nervous and shy at their first group event. Another respondent gave a very thorough assessment of her first impression of the group. She replied,

I visited this group long years ago-- it was a really snobby snotty group of mostly professional people who seemed unhappy with themselves and unfriendly. That’s why I didn’t get involved until ’98 and a friend had to practically drag me to the group.

While there were a few that described the group similarly, many also had good things to say about their first impressions. Several gave the group credit for being friendly and many answered "yes" or "mostly " when asked if the group was open and warm in welcoming them.

Several attempts by group members were made to explain why the group often comes across as cliquish or hard to get to know. One woman replied that it is easy to become a part of the group if you are attractive. In other parts of the survey other respondents complained that people are very friendly to members of the opposite sex. The inverse is true too. Sometimes members will view a new person of the same sex as competition and may not be as friendly. These of course were all answers to questions
about first impressions of the group and later questions dealing with continued happiness in the group gave slightly different results.

_The New Member vs. the Established Member_

At this point it is compelling to compare two members of the group and their reactions to the group in relation to how much experience each has had as a member of the group. One is a 47-year old woman who has been a member of the group for a little under six months. She gave very positive responses to many of the questions and seemed very eager to explain why she liked the group so much. She listed its positive attributes as “active, friendly, humorous, diverse and supportive.” She remarked that the best thing about the group was making new friends and a sense of belonging. Her personality has improved as a result of being a member of this group in that she is more confident and feels more secure. When asked if she had ever had any negative experiences with singles group she said that she had experienced men that were too aggressive, but that this was not exclusive to this group. Her list of negative adjectives included “dangerous, predatory and uncaring.” Several times throughout her responses she brought up the idea of supportiveness and even listed this as her responsibility to the group. Overall she seemed very pleased with her membership in the group and how the group treated her.

Another member of the group had quite a different response to his involvement in the group. He is a 45-year old man who has been participating in this group for 14 years. Many of his responses were somewhat negative and he had a generally cynical approach to the benefits of this group. He said the worst thing about this group was that the people were “old.” He did remark that he thought the group could be open and warm and that he enjoyed meeting new people, but also listed some negative attributes as well. He felt that
pressure was a big drawback to this group and that he had a definite responsibility to be honest in what he wanted out of the group and in his intentions. Though he does not believe his expectations for the group are the same as the other group members he has continued to be an active member almost since the group’s inception. His responses made him seem as though he was not very satisfied with his involvement with the group after all this time.

It is interesting and very telling to look at these two people and their responses given the amount of time each had been with the group. It may be that these two people are just the extremes on a continuum of personality types that are likely to be happy in a group setting such as this. The woman, while having been in the group considerably less time, seems very excited and happy with her involvement. The man, however, does not at all seem satisfied. One wonders why he even bothers to continue in the group. In the survey there were many who had spent several years as a member of this group and seemed to have less satisfaction with it than those who had been a member for a shorter amount of time. This is not true of every member but certainly applies to those that responded to the survey. One woman who had been a member for more than five years stated that she had been very pleased with the group and her involvement but that it no longer met her needs. She had been dating someone for a few years and felt a little out of place in the group (she did however praise the efforts of the leaders and the other members in being good friends and a supportive group of people).

Expectations

One problem that is always hard to solve when judging a respondent’s level of satisfaction with the group is gauging a person’s expectations from the beginning. We all
know that if your expectations are impossibly high you are very likely to be let down and be less satisfied. For this reason a question asking members if they thought their expectations were the same as other group members was included in the survey. Many felt that they shared the same desire for friendship as the other members. One respondent remarked that she did not know and did not care whether she had the same expectations for her membership as the other members. She went on to say,

Others probably come just looking for someone of the opposite sex to date or have a relationship with- sure I’d like to think there will be a man that comes along that I’m really attracted to, but I don’t dwell on it. My expectations in finding friends has been met many times over.

Many respondents were fairly certain that other group members were looking mostly for friendship just as they were, but if this was not the case, were not really bothered by it. After all they are free to choose to engage in any type of relationship they desire, whether it be purely friendship or more of a dating relationship.

Conclusion

Though this paper deals mainly with the friendship aspect of singles groups there is a lot of emphasis put on dating. Many of the respondents were dating other members of the group or had in the past at the time of the survey. As mentioned several have lived with other members of the group, or other people they have met in singles groups. Overall it seems that many are just content with friendship or casual dating. Respondents often replied that the best thing about the group was being with peers, who are likeminded and churchgoers. Once again we see that there is more to this group than simply dating or simply friendship.
In studying singles groups I found a lot of information that was contrary to what singles researchers have stated about singles groups. They are not for the hopeless single person; they are usually a first step towards dating again, not the last ditch effort that the general public tends to see them as. Singles groups provide a way to integrate the newly divorced, widowed or just lonely never-been-married single into the dating world, but they also perform a much more important function as well. They serve as a means of pairing singles with others who are like minded and in the same situation. Therefore proving themselves to be a great source of support and a vast social network for the single person.