Strains of Singlehood in Later Life: Do Race and Gender Matter?

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Objectives. Few studies have identified the distinctive aspects of singlehood that are distressing to older adults. The objectives of our study were: (a) to examine whether divorced, widowed, and never-married older adults differed in their experiences of *single strain*, an indicator of chronic stressors associated with being unmarried; and (b) to assess whether the marital status differences we explored varied by gender and race.

Methods. Using data from a subsample of 530 unmarried older adults and ordinary least squares regression, we estimated main and interactive effects of marital status, gender, and race on single strain.

Results. Divorced and widowed persons reported higher single strain than never-married persons, although the magnitude of these effects varied considerably by race and gender. Never-married White women reported higher levels of single strain than their male counterparts. White widows and widowers exhibited higher single strain than widowed Black adults. Black women uniformly fared better than White women, whereas divorced and never-married Black men were not different from their White peers in terms of single strain.

Discussion. Psychological adjustment to singlehood among older adults reflects patterns of gender and race stratification and socialization over the life course.

FEW studies have examined specific aspects of singlehood that unmarried older adults perceive as difficult and distressing, nor have studies identified whether the strains of single life vary across different unmarried groups. In this article, we focus on the strains of singlehood (henceforth "single strain"), which are conceptualized as perceived chronic stressors that older adults attribute to their status of being unmarried and not living with an intimate partner. Single strain reflects both practical and socioemotional stressors that may be experienced by older unmarried persons, such as difficulty leading an active social life, the absence of intimacy and shared day-to-day experiences with another person, anticipation of a difficult future, and the lack of potential sources of help should the need arise. The objectives of our study were (a) to examine whether divorced, widowed, and never-married older adults differed in their exposure to single strain; and (b) to assess whether the marital status differences we explored varied by gender and race.

The Association Between Marital Status and Well-Being

Numerous studies have documented the mental health advantage of married persons relative to the unmarried (e.g., Menaghan & Lieberman, 1986; Pearlin & Johnson, 1977; Umberson, Wortman, & Kessler, 1992). Researchers have proposed two broad explanations of marital status differences in psychological well-being: social selection and social causation.

The social selection argument suggests that persons with poor physical and emotional health are less likely to marry or remain married (Goldman, 1993). The social causation perspective encompasses several distinctive yet complementary approaches. First, the marital resource model holds that the social, economic, emotional, and health-regulating benefits of marriage enhance well-being (K. Williams & Umberson, 2004). In contrast, the crisis model suggests that the stressors of marital dissolution may undermine mental health more than the resources of marriage benefit well-being. Because the effects of stressful events usually are short lived, subjective well-being tends to decline immediately after marital disruption, but then gradually increases and approaches the pre-dissolution level (Booth & Amato, 1991; Mastekaasa, 1994; Umberson & Williams, 1999). Finally, the life strains perspective (Menaghan & Lieberman, 1986; Pearlin & Johnson, 1977) proposes that the strains associated with singlehood are built into the structure of unmarried life and do not attenuate with the passage of time. However, both the crisis and life strains perspectives implicitly conceptualize single individuals as formerly married persons who have experienced the loss of marital resources. Neither perspective acknowledges explicitly that some single persons have never been married and thus may be financially, instrumentally, and emotionally self-reliant.

Heterogeneity Among Unmarried Adults

Widowed, divorced, and never-married persons may vary in their experiences of single strain because of the diverse pathways into singlehood over the life course. First, widowhood is an anticipated transition in late life, especially for women (Martin Matthews, 1991). In contrast, for most divorced older adults, divorce may have represented a nonnormative and even stigmatized transition to singlehood; thus, they may have lacked peer support and guidance when they were coping with marital dissolution.

Second, becoming widowed or divorced likely entails a disruption to daily activities, many of which previously involved a spouse. Conversely, never-married older adults do

not experience the jarring discontinuity in daily routines that typically accompanies spousal death or divorce. Never-married persons may instead benefit from a lifetime of developing skills and resources that facilitate living alone (Barrett, 1999). Because never-married older adults have not maintained a gender-typed specialization of household labor within marriage, they may be self-sufficient in most practical life domains, including financial provision and homemaking (Gordon, 1994).

Third, according to the marital resource model, emotional support and social integration are important benefits conferred by marriage (Gerstel, Riessman, & Rosenfield, 1985; Ross, 1995). When marriages dissolve, the divorced and widowed might lose a key source of social support (Umberson et al., 1992). Whereas divorced and widowed individuals may face *desolation*, or an increase in social isolation following the loss of their partner (Gubrium, 1974), the never married may enjoy continuous, well-established patterns of social engagement and may have adapted to their single status by maintaining platonic friendships or romantic relationships with a nonmarital partner (Barrett, 1999).

In sum, because never-married persons have not experienced the "crisis" of transitioning out of marriage and may have developed skills and resources earlier in life to prepare them for a lifetime of singlehood, never-married older adults may be less likely than their divorced and widowed peers to perceive emotional and practical aspects of single life as stressful. Therefore, we expected that the never married would report lower levels of single strain compared to the divorced and the widowed.

Gender and Race Differences in the Association Between Marital Status and Single Strain

We proposed further that never-married, divorced, and widowed categories would be heterogeneous; that is, both expectations for and experiences of marriage and singlehood would be shaped by race and gender. Thus, we explored whether singlehood was experienced differently by members of four demographic subgroups: Black women, Black men, White women, and White men. We did so by evaluating the extent to which race and gender jointly moderated the effects of marital status on single strain.

Gender.—Research suggests that the rewards and costs of marriage (and, consequently, singlehood) are shaped by gender, particularly for current cohorts of older adults who maintained a rigid gender-based division of labor in their households (Bernard, 1972). As a result, men and women may have experienced marital dissolution differently. Women tend to receive more financial advantages from marriage, which means that marital disruption may lead to greater economic strain for women than men (Holden & Smock, 1991). Among men, marital dissolution is associated with social isolation and loss of emotional intimacy (Gerstel et al., 1985). In addition, men typically obtain more instrumental benefits from marriage than do women, in the form of household services (Gupta, 1999) and health regulation (K. Williams, 2004).

Marital dissolution—usually through widowhood—is an anticipated life-course transition for older women (Martin Matthews, 1991) who may be better prepared for spousal death than older men. Moreover, older men and women face different prospects of remarriage after marital disruption. Widowed and divorced men are more likely than women to remarry, and remarriage tends to select men with the highest levels of personal resources (Teachman & Hechert, 1985). As a result, the average well-being of men remaining divorced or widowed may be lower than that of their female counterparts.

Race.—Whereas gender differences in the effect of marital status on well-being are relatively well documented, less is known about variation by race. Sample surveys of older populations typically do not include large enough subsamples of Black older adults to conduct fine-grained analyses of marital status differences in well-being. Our analysis extends prior research by exploring race differences in the perceptions of singlehood with a larger sample that contained roughly equal proportions of Black and White older persons.

Previous research has shown that the experiences of marriage and singlehood differ dramatically for Black and White adults. Black Americans marry later than their White peers and have higher rates of divorce, separation, widowhood, and lifelong singlehood (Engram & Lockery, 1993; Norton & Moorman, 1987). These demographic trends have created a context in which marriage is no longer normative in the Black population (Tucker & Taylor, 1989). Therefore, the stigma of being unmarried and the psychological distress associated with marital dissolution tend to be less acute for Black than for White individuals (Carr, 2004; Kitson & Holmes, 1992; D. R. Williams, Takeuchi, & Adair, 1992).

Moreover, the rewards and costs of marriage (and singlehood) may be less differentiated by gender for Black than for White persons. For example, the division of household labor is more egalitarian in Black households (Orbuch & Eyster, 1997), and Black married women are more likely to work for pay outside the home relative to White women (Orbuch & Custer, 1995). Thus, with respect to the joint effects of gender and race, we expected gender differences in single strain to be more pronounced among White than Black older adults: Black spouses may have more experience in performing both "male" and "female" roles in marriage and, thus, may be better prepared than White spouses for the loss of their martial role.

Summary of Questions and Hypotheses

We examined (a) the association between marital status and single strain, and (b) the extent to which unmarried persons' single strain varied by gender and race. Because singlehood is a heterogeneous category, we hypothesized differences between unmarried groups in the reports of single strain; specifically, that divorced and widowed older adults would exhibit higher levels of single strain than the never married. Further, we expected to observe heterogeneity within marital status categories based on demographic characteristics—gender and race—that shape the distinctive social and cultural contexts in which individuals experience singlehood.

Our analyses controlled for potential pathways that may have accounted for the association between marital status and single strain. Specifically, we included socioeconomic resources, social support, household composition, and the number of children. In addition, we adjusted for self-rated health in order to capture the potential influence of selection into singlehood based on poor health.

Table 1. Correlation Coefficients and Factor Loadings of the Single Strain Items

						Factor Loading				
	Correlation Coefficient					Total	Men	Women	Black	White
Item	1	2	3	4	5	($N = 530$)	($n = 161$)	($n = 369$)	($n = 298$)	($n = 232$)
1. It's more difficult for you to have an active social life.	—					.59	.68	.55	.50	.65
2. You don't have the intimacy with another person that you would like.	0.39***	—				.50	.52	.49	.51	.45
3. The future looks more difficult.	0.43***	0.27***	—			.60	.62	.59	.60	.59
4. There's no one to take care of you if you ever need help.	0.24***	0.19***	0.31***	—		.51	.46	.53	.63	.41
5. There's no one to share day-to-day experiences.	0.27***	0.31***	0.32***	0.44***	—	.58	.66	.56	.65	.53
Cronbach's alpha						.70	.72	.69	.71	.66

Note: We asked respondents, "You told me earlier that you are (widowed/divorced/separated/never married/not living with a partner). From your experience as a single person, how much do you agree or disagree with these statements?"

***$p < .001$.

METHODS

Sample

The data used in this study are from face-to-face interviews conducted in 2001 with 1,167 adults 65 years of age and older residing in the District of Columbia and two adjoining Maryland counties. Sample selection and recruitment began with the Medicare beneficiary files. We randomly selected a total of 4,800 names (Black women, Black men, White women, and White men) equally divided among the three locales. The result of this division was the creation of 12 groups, each containing 400 names. The goal was to recruit a final sample of 1,200 people, with 100 in each of the 12 groups. Approximately 65% of all eligible respondents (1,741) who were contacted agreed to participate, yielding 1,167 cases. Of the 547 respondents who were unmarried and not cohabiting, we analyzed data for 530 cases that had complete responses to the single strain items.

Measures

In order to assess single strain, we asked respondents who were unmarried and not living with an intimate partner at the time of the interview how much they agreed or disagreed with the five statements shown in Table 1. Response categories were $1 =$ strongly agree, $2 =$ agree, $3 =$ disagree, and $4 =$ strongly disagree. We reverse coded the items and averaged them to create a scale such that higher scores indicated greater single strain. Table 1 shows that the overall psychometric properties of the single strain index were fairly strong. Factor analysis confirmed that each item loaded highly on one dimension; one factor was retained with an eigenvalue of 2.53.

We categorized respondents into three mutually exclusive groups based on their legal marital status: widowed ($n = 327$), divorced or separated ($n = 130$), and never married ($n = 73$). Given their lifelong singlehood and the absence of transitions into and out of marriage, we used the never married as the reference category in our analysis. Duration in unmarried status was the number of years elapsed since divorce or spousal death. We assigned the mean value to never-married persons. Because we measured marital status as a series of dummy variables, with the never married being the omitted category, the effect

of time since marital loss pertained only to divorced or widowed persons.

We coded gender as $1 =$ women ($n = 369$), and $0 =$ men ($n = 161$). We coded race as $1 =$ Black ($n = 298$), and $0 =$ White ($n = 232$). We measured age in years.

Socioeconomic Characteristics

We assessed education with the question "Can you tell me how far you went in school?" Response choices were $1 =$ eighth grade or less, $2 =$ some high school but did not graduate, $3 =$ high school graduate or general equivalency diploma, $4 =$ specialized (vocational) training, $5 =$ some college but no degree earned, and $6 =$ college graduate or more. Income reflected the respondent's total household income before taxes. We imputed the mean value for the 8% of cases with missing data and created a missing income flag that was included in all multivariate models ($0 =$ income was reported, and $1 =$ income was missing). The economic hardship question asked: "Thinking of current times, how difficult is it for you to meet the following needs: Housing? Food? Transportation costs? Medical expenses? Clothing?" Response categories were $1 =$ not at all difficult, $2 =$ somewhat difficult, and $3 =$ very difficult. We averaged the scores to create an index ($\alpha = .812$).

We assessed self-rated health with a 1-item measure asking respondents, "In general, would you say at the present time your health is: (1) excellent, (2) very good, (3) good, (4) fair, (5) poor?" We reverse coded the measure so that higher scores corresponded to better health.

Family/Social Characteristics

Living alone was a dummy variable coded 1 if a respondent currently lived alone and 0 otherwise (other people in the respondent's household did not include intimate partners). Number of children was the total number of biological or adopted children. Social support items assessed how strongly one agreed or disagreed with five statements: "There is no one who really understands you," "You have a friend or relative whose opinions you trust," "You have people around you to help you to keep your spirits up," "You have at least one friend or relative you want to be with when you are down or discouraged," and "You have at least one friend or relative to whom you could confide your deepest secrets." Response

Table 2. Summary Statistics for the Study Variables by Marital Status

Variable	Total ($N = 530$)	Never Married ($n = 73$)	Divorced ($n = 130$)	Widowed ($n = 327$)
Single strain	2.13 (0.47)	2.03 (0.54)*	2.12 (0.52)	2.16 (0.44)
Duration in unmarried status	—		25.56 (11.95)	14.52 (11.84)
Gender (female = 1)	0.69	0.58*	0.63	0.74
Race (Black = 1)	0.56	0.36***	0.64	0.56
Age	75.86 (6.89)	75.14 (7.16)	72.55 (5.66)	77.19 (6.81)
Self-rated health	3.23 (1.09)	3.43 (0.92)	3.23 (1.19)	3.20 (1.08)
Education	4.09 (1.74)	4.44 (1.90)	4.15 (1.69)	3.97 (1.72)
Income	4.33 (2.62)	4.72 (2.98)	4.22 (2.84)	4.39 (2.51)
Economic hardship,	1.13 (0.30)	1.16 (0.37)	1.16 (0.32)	1.11 (0.27)
Number of children	2.66 (2.38)	0.64 (1.68)***	2.89 (2.13)	3.05 (2.41)
Living alone (yes = 1)	0.65	0.72	0.68	0.60
Social support	3.20 (0.45)	3.11 (0.41)*	3.20 (0.48)	3.22 (0.44)

Notes: Data are presented as *M* (*SD*) unless otherwise noted. Asterisks denote significant differences among marital status categories, where never married is the reference category. SD = standard deviation.
*$p < .05$; ***$p < .001$ (two-tailed tests).

choices were 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = disagree, and 4 = strongly disagree. We averaged and recoded the items such that higher scores indicated more support ($\alpha = .774$).

RESULTS

Our main objective was to explore the association between marital status and single strain and to evaluate the joint effects of race and gender on this association (i.e., three-way interactions). The bivariate analysis presented in Table 2 reveals that never-married persons reported the lowest level of single strain, followed by the divorced, whereas the widowed reported the highest level of single strain. Women outnumbered men in each unmarried category, and this gap was particularly pronounced among the widowed, reflecting men's higher mortality and higher probability of remarriage upon spousal loss. Black adults were underrepresented among the never married and overrepresented among the divorced. The never married reported higher levels of self-rated health, education, and income than their formerly married peers. Due to the low prevalence of nonmarital childbearing among older cohorts, the never married had significantly fewer children than the divorced and the widowed. Finally, the never married were the most likely to live alone and reported the lowest level of social support among the three groups, whereas the widowed reported the highest.

Model 1 in Table 3 shows that the widowed and the divorced reported higher levels of single strain than the never married, net of time elapsed since marital disruption, although this difference reached statistical significance only among the widowed. Contrary to the crisis perspective, the duration in unmarried status was not related to single strain, perhaps because most persons in our sample had been widowed and divorced for long periods (an average of 15 and 26 years, respectively); thus, few people had experienced very recent martial disruption.

As indicated in Model 2, women and men reported similar levels of single strain. In contrast, Black persons exhibited significantly lower levels of single strain than White older adults. Moreover, after adjusting for gender and race, the coefficient for divorced persons increased by 54% and became significant at the $p < .05$ level. This suppression effect may have been produced by two patterns: Black individuals were more likely to be divorced, and they reported lower levels of single strain, than their White counterparts.

In Model 3, we tested whether the association between marital status and single strain was contingent on race and gender by introducing three-way interactions. Figure 1 illustrates the levels of single strain for each marital status category by gender and race. Among never-married persons, White women reported significantly higher levels of single strain than White men; yet, this gender difference was reversed among Black persons. Among divorced older adults, both White and Black women reported elevated single strain relative to their male peers, but this gender gap was wider for White individuals. Finally, among widowed men and women, race differences were more pronounced than gender differences: Widowed White men and women exhibited higher single strain than their Black peers.

Black women reported lower levels of single strain than White women in all unmarried groups, whereas for men the pattern varied: Widowed Black men experienced lower single strain than their White peers, yet there were no significant race differences in single strain among divorced and never-married men. (Although Figure 1 indicates that never-married Black men reported higher single strain than White men, this difference was trivial, as revealed by the nonsignificant race coefficient in Model 3.) In sum, being never married or divorced was particularly problematic for White women in terms of single strain, whereas widowhood was worse for both White men and women relative to their Black counterparts.

After adjustment for age and self-rated health in Model 4, the main and interactive effects of marital status on single strain remained basically unchanged. Although age was unrelated to single strain, self-rated health was related strongly and negatively to it. Model 5 revealed that perceived economic hardship was significantly associated with single strain, although income and education were not. Furthermore, as shown in Model 6, the number of children and social support were related negatively to single strain, whereas household composition was unrelated to it. Finally, when we ran Model 6 without interaction terms in order to ascertain the main effects

Table 3. Unstandardized Ordinary Least Squares Regression Coefficients From Models Predicting Single Strain (*N* = 530)

Variable	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Marital status[a]						
Divorced (yes = 1)	.10 (.07)	.16 (.07)*	.10 (.16)	.08 (.16)	.06 (.16)	.22 (.16)
Widowed (yes = 1)	.12 (.06)*	.14 (.06)*	.52 (.13)***	.47 (.13)***	.47 (.13)***	.53 (.12)***
Duration in unmarried status	−.01 (.01)	−.01 (.01)	−.01 (.01)	−.01 (.01)	−.01 (.01)	−.01 (.01)
Gender (female = 1)		.05 (.04)	.45 (.13)***	.42 (.13)**	.40 (.13)**	.37 (.13)**
Race (Black = 1)		−.19 (.04)***	.23 (.17)	.15 (.17)	.19 (.17)	.15 (.17)
Interactions						
Divorced × Gender			−.09 (.20)	−.06 (.20)	−.03 (.20)	−.11 (.19)
Widowed × Gender			−.51 (.16)**	−.47 (.16)**	−.46 (.16)**	−.43 (.15)**
Divorced × Race			−.07 (.23)	−.05 (.22)	−.06 (.22)	−.17 (.22)
Widowed × Race			−.51 (.20)*	−.47 (.19)*	−.49 (.20)*	−.46 (.19)*
Gender × Race			−.64 (.22)**	−.59 (.22)**	−.61 (.22)**	−.51 (.21)*
Divorced × Gender × Race			.33 (.29)	.33 (.28)	.33 (.28)	.37 (.27)
Widowed × Gender × Race			.68 (.25)**	.64 (.25)**	.65 (.25)**	.60 (.24)*
Age				.01 (.01)	.01 (.01)	−.01 (.01)
Self-rated health				−.10 (.01)***	−.09 (.01)***	−.08 (.01)***
Socioeconomic characteristics						
Education					.02 (.01)	.02 (.01)
Income[b]					−.01 (.01)	−.01 (.01)
Economic hardship					.14 (.06)*	.13 (.06)*
Family/social characteristics						
Number of children						−.01 (.00)*
Living alone (yes = 1)						−.01 (.04)
Social support						−.24 (.04)***
Constant	2.06	2.10	1.84	2.18	1.86	2.83
Adjusted *R*^{2}	.01	.04	.06	.11	.12	.17

Note: Data are presented as unstandardized regression coefficients (*SE*) unless otherwise noted. *SE* = standard error.

[a]Never married is the reference group.

[b]All models controlled for missing income, which was not significant.

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001 (two-tailed tests).

of widowhood and divorce on single strain while adjusting for all other variables, the divorced and the widowed still exhibited significantly higher levels of single strain than the never married (all models available from corresponding author).

DISCUSSION

Studies of marital status and well-being typically compare married and unmarried persons without acknowledging that singlehood is a broad and heterogeneous category that includes those who have always been single and those who have transitioned into this status via divorce or spousal death at different points in the life course. Even bereavement and divorce researchers often consider only one of the two transitions and typically use currently married persons rather than the never married as their benchmark. Our study revealed heterogeneity both between and within unmarried groups in terms of perceived single strain. We found that the ways that divorced, widowed, and never-married older adults experience singlehood were further shaped by their gender and race.

Heterogeneity Between Marital Status Groups

The divorced and widowed reported higher levels of single strain than the never married, net of all explanatory variables in the full model. The observed advantage of the never married with respect to single strain was consistent with the crisis

perspective emphasizing adverse implications of marital disruption (Booth & Amato, 1991). Our findings suggest that because the never married have not experienced marital dissolution and the stressors associated with it, they may perceive singlehood as less stressful than do the formerly married. Moreover, our bivariate analysis revealed that, compared to the formerly married, the never married reported higher levels of resources, such as health, education, and
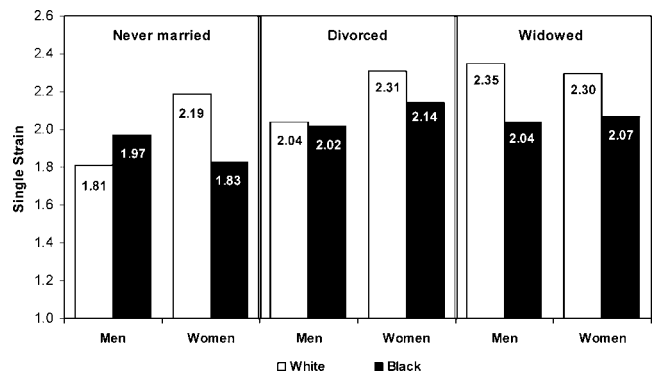

Figure 1. Predicted levels of single strain across marital status groups, by gender and race. The levels of single strain by marital status, gender, and race are shown net of all variables in Model 6 (see Table 3).

income. This pattern does not support the social selection view positing that people who remain single are psychologically and physically less healthy and possess fewer socially valued resources than people who enter marriage. Rather, the lower level of single strain among the never married suggests that lifelong continuity in the unmarried status may be associated with the accumulation of resources that facilitate single lifestyle, such as autonomy, self-reliance, and instrumentalism in mastering a broad range of skills.

We should note that in our sample the never married appeared less socially integrated than the divorced and the widowed because never-married persons had fewer children, were more likely to live alone, and reported the lowest levels of social support among the three groups. Yet, according to desolation theory (Gubrium, 1974), a relative decline in social engagement after martial disruption ("desolation") is more detrimental to psychological well-being than an absolute level of isolation among the never married. Being never married is associated with maintaining similar levels of social participation in old age relative to earlier life, and this continuity may entail emotional benefits.

In addition, our findings indicate that although social support and the number of children are related negatively to single strain, the mere presence of other people in the household is not. This pattern underscores that social integration is less important for the well-being of unmarried older adults than social support (Ross, 1995).

Heterogeneity Within Marital Status Groups

Although differences between marital status groups are important, each group, in turn, is composed of individuals with diverse sociocultural backgrounds, socioeconomic attributes, socialization experiences, and social roles. This diversity can generate important within-group variability in the experiences of singlehood. Our analyses revealed that the effect of marital status on single strain was further contingent upon gender and race.

Never-married (and to a lesser extent, divorced) White women reported significantly higher levels of single strain than White men, whereas White widows and widowers exhibited roughly similar levels of single strain. White women of older cohorts have been socialized to value the roles of wife and mother as the central aspects of their identity (Bernard, 1972). Because marriage is considered a normative and highly desirable state for women, never-married older White women may be more likely than their male peers to face negative cultural attitudes, to cope with institutional and interpersonal discrimination, and to be viewed as victims who have defaulted to singlehood (Byrne & Carr, 2005). Thus, remaining single may entail more psychological costs and stressful experiences for women than for men of older cohorts because lifelong singlehood represents a failure to achieve the highest goal to which women should aspire. Likewise, divorce may signify an unexpected and undesired transition to singlehood and perhaps be an indicator of a conflicted marriage and the belief that one inadequately fulfilled the wife role. Because divorce might pose a threat to women's identities and undermine their feelings of self-worth, older divorced women may perceive certain aspects of singlehood more negatively—and, thus, report higher levels

of single strain—than their male peers. In contrast, widowed women have fulfilled the societal expectation that they will marry and remain married until "death do us part" (Cotten, 1999). Widowed women also may turn to their peers for instrumental and emotional support, given that many of their friends or sisters may have also recently made the transition to widowhood.

Although researchers have widely documented gender differences in the well-being of unmarried older adults, our findings suggest that race is also a powerful influence on the ways that marital status affects psychological adjustment. First, among the widowed, the between-gender gap in single strain was smaller than the between-race gap: Widowed White men and women reported higher single strain than widowed Black adults. Second, Black women in all three unmarried groups exhibited lower single strain than White women. Third, in contrast to women, divorced and never-married Black men were not different from their White peers in terms of single strain.

The race gap in the levels of single strain among the formerly married may reflect the fact that Black and White persons tend to experience marriage differently, and thus may adjust to marital loss in different ways (Carr, 2004). Black married couples are more likely than their White counterparts to both endorse and maintain an equitable division of labor within the home (Orbuch & Eyster, 1997; Taylor, Keith, & Tucker, 1993). Thus, marital dissolution may be a less distressing event for Black than for White persons, as Black individuals are better prepared to manage a broad range of responsibilities following loss. Moreover, some studies have suggested that Black adults experience poorer quality marriages than their White peers and thus are less distressed when their relationships end (Broman, 1993; Goodwin, 2003). Finally, Black persons are less likely than White adults to depend upon and interact with members of the nuclear family only and instead maintain more diffuse social networks that may provide an important source of instrumental and expressive support as older Black individuals adjust to the strains of singlehood (Chatters, Taylor, & Neighbors, 1989; Taylor, Chatters, & Jackson, 1997).

Yet, the lower level of single strain among never-married Black women relative to their White peers requires a look beyond race differences in the experiences of marriage. Black women are the least likely to marry and have the lowest expectation of marriage compared to White adults and Black men (Rodgers & Thornton, 1985; Tucker, Taylor, & Mitchell-Kernan, 1993). Singlehood is culturally normative and statistically prevalent among Black women, primarily as a function of a dramatic sex-ratio imbalance in the Black population (Kitson & Holmes, 1992; Tucker & Taylor, 1989). Therefore, never-married Black women may face less discrimination and fewer negative attitudes over the life course and, thus, may be less prone than White women to perceive singlehood as a source of chronic strain. Moreover, never-married Black women may find social support and empathy from their peers who also have never married.

Although Black women reported less single strain than White women, never-married and divorced Black men did not fare better than their White peers. Because of the shortage of marriageable Black men due to high rates of unemployment, mortality, and incarceration (Fossett & Kiecolt, 1993; Wilson &

Neckerman, 1986), Black men enjoy an advantage on the marriage market and can choose from a large pool of potential mates. Under these circumstances, Black men who have never married or who do not remarry after divorce could possess fewer economic, psychological, and personal resources. This lack of resources might both make them less desirable marriage partners and exacerbate their experiences of singlehood.

In sum, the substantial gender and race variability documented by our findings suggests that the social and cultural context shaping the experiences of unmarried persons over the life course is at least as important in determining the structure and meaning of late-life singlehood as one's legal marital status. Moreover, the lower single strain among the never married indicates that singlehood requires socialization because people who spend a substantial proportion of the life cycle outside marriage may develop skills and resources that facilitate living alone. Thus, our findings imply that social services and interventions for single older adults should include educational programs aimed at promoting personal control, self-reliance, and active problem-solving skills that may enhance the ability to tackle social and instrumental aspects of singlehood.

Several limitations of the present study deserve mention. First, although the measure of single strain captured stressful experiences arising specifically from being unmarried and not living with an intimate partner in late life, we do not know if older adults who answered the single strain items were involved in other types of romantic relationships, such as dating or "living apart together." Future studies should further stratify the unmarried into those who do and do not have a serious romantic relationship.

Moreover, our measure of single strain did not directly assess individuals' perceptions of stress. For example, two unmarried persons who strongly agree that it is more difficult to have an active social life may differ greatly in the extent to which this situation is a source of chronic stress. Future research should incorporate measures that reflect the experiences of stress more explicitly. Another limitation of our data is that we could not distinguish the divorced from the separated and, thus, we were unable to compare the single strain reported by separated Black and White older adults.

Furthermore, our respondents had been widowed or divorced for a long period, approximately 20 years on average. Thus, we could not capture adequately the effects of recent marital disruption. Because the adverse effects of marital loss are the most acute in the short term (Booth & Amato, 1991), future studies of the strains of singlehood should be based on samples comprising representative numbers of recently divorced and widowed people. Finally, our study focused only on adults who were currently aged 65 or older; the linkages between marital status, race, gender, and well-being may change markedly for future cohorts of older adults who may show greater support for divorce or permanent singlehood as an acceptable arrangement (Barrett, 1999). Changes in gendered social roles inside and outside the family suggest that men and women in future generations might face fewer challenges when adjusting to the loss of a partner who typically handled a specific set of gender-typed tasks in the home (Carr & Utz, 2002). Yet, despite these limitations, our study shows persuasively that unmarried persons have very different life experiences, based on their race, gender, and the pathway to singlehood.

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