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Three methodological approaches to studying singlehood

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Abstract

As the number of single (unpartnered) individuals continues to rise, researchers across various disciplines have started to pay more attention to single individuals' lives. Yet, compared to the accumulated knowledge about experiences within romantic relationships, there is far less known about various experiences within singlehood. For singlehood research to grow in both quantity and quality, it is essential that research findings are critically evaluated both in terms of robustness of the evidence and validity of the inferences. In this paper, we review three broad approaches researchers have taken to understand singlehood that centered on (a) between-group status (i.e., single vs. in a relationship) differences, (b) within-person status differences, and (c) within-group variability among singles. With a focus on well-being as an outcome, we illustrate how each approach provides unique insights into singlehood and what caveats there are in interpreting results derived from each approach. Finally, we identify questions or methods that have not been extensively explored within each approach and offer suggestions for future research directions.

KEYWORDS
marriage, mental health, methods, partnership, relationship research, single

With recent demographic changes across the world suggesting increases in the single (i.e., unpartnered) population, researchers have started to pay more attention to single individuals' lives (see the special issue in *Journal of Family Theory & Review*; Lavender-Stott et al., in press). As summarized in a recent review (Girme et al., 2023), a growing body of research is advancing our understanding of single peoples' experiences, including intrapersonal, interpersonal, and

societal factors related to their well-being. Yet, compared to the accumulated knowledge about experiences within romantic relationships, far less is known about various experiences within singlehood. For singlehood research to grow in both quantity and quality, research findings must be critically evaluated both in terms of robustness of the evidence and validity of the inferences. In the present paper, we first briefly review the context in which research on romantic relationships initially developed, including its limited perspectives on singlehood. Then we review three broad approaches researchers have taken to understand singlehood, each centered on (a) between-group status (i.e., single vs. in a relationship) differences, (b) within-person status differences, and (c) within-group variability among singles. Although these approaches can be adopted to study many aspects of singlehood, here we primarily focus on research concerning outcomes that are broadly implicated in single individuals' well-being. We discuss how each approach provides unique insights into what well-being looks like in singlehood and what caveats there are in interpreting results derived from each approach. Finally, for each approach, we identify questions or methods that have not been extensively explored and offer suggestions for future research directions.

1 | INTRODUCTION: SINGLES IN EARLY RELATIONSHIP SCIENCE

By the 1980s, relationship science represented an emerging, unique multidisciplinary field of study (Perlman et al., 2018; Reis & Rusbult, 2004), arguably marked by the publication of the first handbook of close relationships which incorporated perspectives from developmental, social, and clinical psychology as well as communication, family studies and sociology (Duck et al., 1988). Researchers' interest in the scientific study of close relationships, particularly romantic relationships, emerged from multiple theoretical and cultural perspectives (Cassidy, 2000; Fraley et al., 2005; Goode, 1959). Empirical research on this topic also increased alongside theoretical and methodological advances (Reis & Rusbult, 2004) and findings that emphasized the importance of close relationships (e.g., their implications for physical health; Sarason et al., 2001). Simultaneously, the surrounding cultural context also foregrounded committed partnerships as a path to social legitimacy (e.g., legalization of same-sex marriage; Thorne et al., 2019) in a fashion that may have helped this fledgling research area stake its claim to authority. In this way, scientific studies of romantic relationships both reflected and reinforced the social value placed on committed relationships (Day, 2016; DePaulo & Morris, 2005). Indeed, having a romantic relationship appears to afford sufficient cultural currency that people who do not have one are negatively perceived and discriminated against (DePaulo & Morris, 2006; Greitemeyer, 2009), which can undermine their well-being (Girme et al., 2022).

It is in light of this cultural appeal of studying romantic relationships that the lives of single individuals (or more broadly, those not meeting heteronormative standards; Oswald et al., 2005) received little research attention. In fact, when single individuals were of interest, it was primarily to gain insights into the partnering processes, as in the early body of research on attraction (i.e., addressing the question of how and with whom people form a relationship; Dutton & Aron, 1974; Walster et al., 1966). That is, single status was mostly studied as a temporary phase during which people sought a romantic relationship. With an ensuing field-wide shift in research focus towards the *maintenance* of a relationship (Perlman et al., 2018; Reis et al., 2013), interest in the phase preceding or following a relationship–singlehood–waned while theories and observations regarding an ongoing relationship flourished (see Finkel et al.'s [2017] summary of core questions addressed in the field in the past decades).

Considering the amount of evidence suggesting the positive health and well-being implications of having a high-quality romantic relationship (Braithwaite & Holt-Lunstad, 2017; Loving & Slatcher, 2013), as well as the normative frequency with which people engage in committed relationships (Purol et al., 2021; Rauer et al., 2013), investing resources into studying the maintenance of such relationships can be important as a matter of both individual welfare and social policy. However, not only is living single becoming increasingly common, but a considerable proportion of single people today do not actively pursue romantic relationships (Gelles-Watnick, 2023), suggesting growing contentment with and/or commitment to singlehood (also see Böger & Huxhold, 2020; Park et al., 2022 for evidence of generational changes in satisfaction with singlehood). As such, researchers too are shifting their attention

to understanding single people's lives in a way that goes beyond the early work that treated singlehood as a comparative target for couplehood and viewed singlehood primarily through the lens of "absence" or "loss."

In order to broaden understanding of singlehood in ways that account for the diversity of singlehood experiences, research needs to be underpinned by solid and considered methodology. Below, we review previous research on singlehood, with the goal of delineating the distinct methodological approaches researchers have taken and the implications those approaches have for the inferences that can be drawn. Before beginning, it is important to note that the nature of the existing body of relevant work means that almost all research we discuss is predominantly based on heterosexual individuals. Further, although we focus on relationship status as distinguished by romantic pairing (as indicated by our use of the term singles to refer to those not involved in any romantic relationships), some studies reviewed pertain to marital status distinctions.

2 | BETWEEN-GROUP STATUS COMPARISON: DIFFERENCES AMONG SINGLE VERSUS PARTNERED INDIVIDUALS

What is it and what is it good for? Much of what we know about singlehood comes from research comparing single and partnered individuals on a given outcome (see solid-lined box in Figure 1). For example, previous studies have compared single and partnered individuals (or married vs. unmarried individuals) in terms of psychological or physical well-being indicators, often finding less favorable outcomes for single (or unmarried) people (Haring-Hidore et al., 1985; Schoenborn, 2004). This approach essentially speaks to average differences between single and partnered individuals in well-being with the key independent variable being relationship status. While this approach typically involves analyzing cross-sectional data, comparing single and partnered individuals at a single time point, researchers occasionally utilize longitudinal data to assess changes in outcomes. For example, Girme et al. (2016) compared groups of people who have consistently been single versus consistently partnered in their examination of how relationship status is associated with changes in well-being over time. Nevertheless, the primary aim of such studies, examining average differences across people of distinct relationship status, is similar to that of cross-sectional comparisons.

Research focused on between-group status comparisons is most suitable for providing descriptive insights into how single and partnered individuals, *on average*, differ in beliefs, goals, and behaviors that are related to well-being. Such insights can be both informative in their own right and useful in generating follow-up questions that might require more resource-intensive investigations. In particular, findings from between-group comparisons
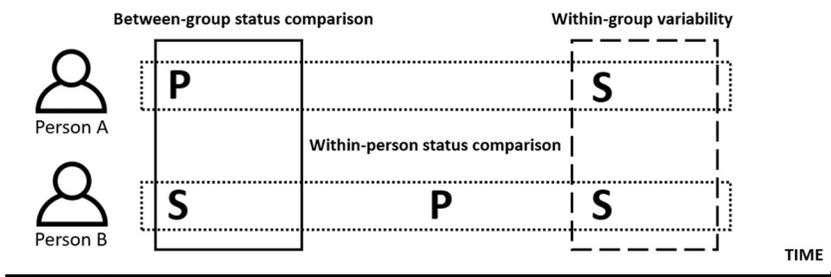

FIGURE 1 Three methodological approaches to studying singlehood. Hypothetical changes in relationship status are illustrated. P = partnered (in a relationship); S = single. **Solid-lined box (Between-group status comparison):** A focus on differences in a given outcome among people who differ in their relationship status (or in longitudinal data, while their relationship statuses are stably different). **Dotted-lined box (Within-person status comparison):** A focus on changes in the outcome as a given individual moves in and out of a relationship. **Dashed-lined box (Within-group investigation):** A focus on the variability in the outcome among single individuals (or in longitudinal data, while they are single; this may involve prediction of exiting singlehood).

can lay the foundation for exploring mechanistic pathways (but see caveats below). For example, cross-culturally examining well-being differences between single and partnered groups (Diener et al., 2000; Vanassche et al., 2013; Verbakel, 2012) not only provides insights into the generalizability of the findings but also drives the question of what societal-level factors contribute to widening or narrowing the observed well-being differences.

In fact, even null findings showing no difference between single and partnered people can inspire a focused investigation into the role relationship status might play in a given domain. For example, the finding of no significant differences between single and partnered individuals' levels of stress related to family commitment (e.g., providing care for children and/or older loved ones; Ta et al., 2017) may be reflective of competing pathways underlying this association. That is, some factors may contribute to unmarried individuals' greater stress perceptions, such as not having a spouse to share the burden of supporting other family members; other factors may contribute to lower stress perceptions among unmarried individuals, such as not having to share the spouse's family commitments. To better understand such complexity, one could conduct a follow-up study that can capture multiple processes that may have contributed to the cross-sectional link.

What are some caveats? In essence, trying to understand singlehood by comparing singles to partnered individuals is akin to an attempt to understand the causes and consequences of (not) owning a car by comparing people with versus without a car. Just as we cannot infer from car owners having higher average income that car ownership makes one wealthier, group-level differences in well-being between people with versus without a partner cannot be interpreted to support the idea that relationships confer well-being benefits or that entering a relationship will improve one's well-being. Such a challenge in causal inference may not necessarily be a limitation if the aim of the research is to obtain a descriptive portrayal of the average lives of single and partnered people. But if researchers wished to interpret the results as indicating differences *due to* having a romantic partner, this approach is indeed limited (Wang & Cheng, 2020). For example, there is a possibility that the direction is reversed (i.e., happier people being more likely to enter a relationship) or that there are other variables at play (e.g., personality) that are related to both the likelihood of being in a relationship and one's well-being at a given time point. Critically, any attempts to *explain* between-group differences are likely to presume causal effects of having or not having a romantic relationship. For this reason, it is important that speculations about any mechanisms based solely on the between-group comparisons require caution and should certainly be followed by a test using longitudinal data and adequate analyses.

Finally, it is worth discussing the nature of the collected sample when researchers attempt to make between-group comparisons. While the issue of selection bias has not been extensively studied in this specific context, insights from other fields can be useful in elucidating how it might come into play (e.g., Delgado-Rodriguez & Llorca, 2004). Imagine comparing the well-being of hospitalized patients to that of healthy controls. The patient sample in a cross-sectional survey is more likely to include those with a longer length of hospital stay (Frantal et al., 2016), skewing the sample characteristics (i.e., over-representation of those with more severe health conditions) and affecting the results of the between-group comparisons. Likewise, comparing single versus partnered groups at a single time point can be biased by over-representing those who have assumed the given status for longer, leading to systematic differences in the characteristics related to relationship entrance or termination in both groups. Somewhat consistent with this idea, Darling and Burns' (2023) recent simulation showed that, when relationship pairings of three types of initially single individuals—secure, anxious, and avoidant—who systematically differ in average relationship duration are considered, cross-sectional sampling of dyads may over-represent long-lasting relationships (those of secure-secure individuals) while under-representing short-term ones (those involving avoidant or anxious individuals). Based on these findings, one could argue that characteristics associated with the ability or motivation to maintain a long-lasting relationship may be overly represented in the partnered sample but under-represented in the single sample. Overall, it is important to consider the potential for systematic bias in the individuals sampled to represent each group when interpreting between-group comparisons, and even preemptively address this issue by more carefully determining the eligibility criteria (e.g., duration of having been single/partnered).

What's next? With growing attention being paid to variability within the single population (Girme et al., 2023), a particularly notable research question involving this between-group approach concerns moderators. Moderation

analyses aim to examine under which conditions the well-being differences across relationship status may be more or less pronounced. While still focusing on the average differences between single and partnered individuals, moderation analyses can provide a more nuanced understanding of the differences by acknowledging the heterogeneity within each group. For example, previous work has examined whether well-being differences between single and partnered individuals vary depending on sex, age, culture, or interpersonal orientations (Bulloch et al., 2017; Girme et al., 2016; Verbakel, 2012).

One way to extend this line of research is to consider moderators that are not necessarily applicable to both single and partnered individuals. Consider the question, "is a bad relationship better or worse than no relationship?" A conceptual moderator, in this case, is relationship quality, a variable that applies only to partnered individuals. In their investigation of this question, Holt-Lunstad et al. (2008) grouped individuals low and high in marital quality and compared them to unmarried individuals. They found that although married individuals show better emotional and physical functioning than unmarried individuals on average, those low in marital quality do not necessarily fare better than unmarried individuals. More recently, Adamczyk et al. (2021) reached a parallel conclusion when they tested a similar question using relationship quality as an internal moderator (see Mirowsky, 2013). Rather than categorizing people into groups (having a high- or low-quality relationship), this approach treats the moderator as a continuous variable, further allowing for determining at what point of the moderator the two groups do not significantly differ.

Unfortunately, previous research has primarily approached moderation questions, particularly those involving internal moderators, from the perspective of variability within couplehood (i.e., what type of relationships are more or less distinguishable from no relationship). What beliefs or lifestyles characterizing singlehood can amplify or mitigate relationship-status differences in well-being has not been well-explored and may be one promising direction for future research. The emerging body of work on singles' well-being suggests several variables as good candidates for such moderators, posing questions such as whether single individuals would be comparable to their partnered counterparts in well-being if they have ways to meet their sexual needs, have romantic opportunities they want to pursue, have been single for a longer period of time, or feel that they have chosen to be single.

3 | WITHIN-PERSON STATUS COMPARISON: DIFFERENCES BETWEEN SINGLE VERSUS PARTNERED LIFE STAGES

What is it and what is it good for? Another approach to understanding singlehood is to examine differences across relationship status within a given individual. With this approach, researchers typically track individuals over a period of time in order to capture changes in individuals' relationship status – that is, tracking as individuals transition across single and coupled status (see dotted-lined box in Figure 1). In essence, this approach acknowledges singlehood as a life phase rather than a stable group status, switching the question of "*How well single versus partnered individuals fare*" to the question of "*How people fare when they are single versus partnered.*" Typically drawing on longitudinal data, this approach can reveal different insights than between-group status comparisons. For example, when the link between relationship status and satisfaction with work-life balance was examined in cross-sectional data (i.e., from the between-group perspective), Park, MacDonald, and Impett (2023) found that single individuals were equally or less satisfied with their work-life balance than their partnered counterparts. However, when comparing a given individual's outcome as they transitioned across different relationship statuses (i.e., examined from the within-person perspective), the results showed that people appeared to be more satisfied with work-life balance when they were single (vs. partnered). Examining how satisfaction with work-life balance changes *within a given individual* accounts for the effects of other stable differences (albeit not time-varying confounders), such as personality, that may affect both the odds of being single and levels of satisfaction with work-life balance, thereby better speaking to differences specifically due to being in a relationship.

One research question this approach has often been employed to address pertains to the effects of entering or exiting singlehood (or entering/exiting a partnership) on well-being. For example, Luhmann et al.'s (2012)

meta-analysis of prospective studies showed that two forms of entering singlehood, becoming divorced or widowed, were related to an initial drop in well-being, followed by an increase (i.e., adaptation). Given that experimental designs that manipulate relationship status are simply not feasible, researchers are increasingly adopting more sophisticated statistical methods to enhance causal inference in their analyses of within-person comparisons (but see Rohrer & Murayama, 2023). For example, van Scheppingen and Leopold (2020) matched individuals who ended up divorcing to those who stayed married on variables such as satisfaction with life, health, and income in the year they got married. Using a series of piecewise growth curve models, researchers then examined how these individuals' life satisfaction changed before, during, and after the year of divorce. This approach allowed researchers to understand changes in well-being that occur close to the timing of relationship transition while accounting for the influence of pre-existing differences between those who divorce and not. Further, by comparing the two groups' trajectories, they could better speak to changes that are due to divorce. Results from these analyses indicated that although there was a linear decline in life satisfaction in the years preceding divorce among the divorcees, followed by a drop in the year of divorce, even those who stayed married showed a linear decline in life satisfaction, suggesting that changes in life satisfaction may not be entirely attributable to divorce.

What are some caveats? Less discussed in the literature, however, is the nature of the data on which this type of research commonly draws. As the within-person approach requires observation of a change in relationship status, a large sample of participants' repeated assessments of relationship status is needed to secure a sufficient number of events. Given this, it is not surprising that work examining transitions across relationship status has predominately conducted secondary analyses of existing panel studies (Anusic et al., 2014; Blekesaune, 2018; Mikucka et al., 2021; Yap et al., 2012).

While data from such studies often have several strengths, such as large sample size and representativeness of national populations, they also have caveats (also see Hofferth, 2005; Trzesniewski et al., 2011). Panel studies are typically based on annual data collection thus lack temporal precision in assessing relationship transitions (i.e., day 1 of a relationship or a breakup can be indistinguishable from day 364) and can be insufficient to capture full relationship histories (e.g., relationships shorter than a year can go unnoticed if the person is single when completing the surveys) unless more information is collected. They are also more focused on committed forms of a relationship, such as cohabiting or marital relationships, than casual ones, for which questions are rarely asked. The lack of information on casual relationships leads to missed opportunities to examine variability during non-marital periods. This over-looked variability during the non-marital period might be critical considering that singlehood is increasingly defined as absence of *any* partnership (Adamczyk et al., 2023; Girme et al., 2016; Oh et al., 2022; Park et al., 2021). Specifically, transitions in and out of marital relationships will have limited implications for singlehood defined this way as it is unclear whether or not one was "single" in their non-marital periods.

Finally, although one of the strengths of many panel studies is the representativeness of the sample, note that the nature of the sample changes when a subset of data is used (as in the case of selectively analyzing individuals experiencing transitions), thus representativeness is no longer guaranteed. Indeed, this type of analysis requires attention to both the endogenous effects of sample selection (i.e., differences between those who have vs. have not experienced a relationship transition) and the effects of attrition (i.e., differences between those who stayed vs. have left the study). Researchers across disciplines have adopted different ways to statistically tackle these issues (Elwert & Winship, 2014; Schmidt & Woll, 2017; Zinn & Gnambs, 2018). Yet, the question of whose data is being analyzed is fundamentally a conceptual one; examining and presenting how the analytic sample differed from others (i.e., those who remained consistently single or partnered) in the key variables should always be encouraged. This also helps researchers to carefully consider potential limits in generalizability of the observed findings. For example, any advantages or disadvantages associated with relationship transitions are by nature based on analyses of a sample of people who have entered a relationship, thus may well not apply to people with certain characteristics who never partner.

What's next? Overall, focusing on within-person differences across relationship status can provide valuable insights into how people's lives change as they enter and leave singlehood, and provides one of the best avenues for detecting whether relationship status changes confer individual or other social benefits, which may be a crucial policy question (Feld & Meyer, 2018). However, the biggest obstacle to adopting this approach may be the resources it requires.

Secondary data analysis is an excellent means for exploration but given the limited range and suboptimal measurement of variables included in existing datasets, there are research questions that simply require new data collection. One alternative to longitudinal data collection, especially for exploratory purposes or when focusing on changes in objective features of life during singlehood versus couplehood (e.g., career status, physical health outcomes), is collecting retrospective data. For example, in Gumà et al. (2015), participants reconstructed their partnership history between the ages of 30 and 64, which was related to the period during which their health conditions were poor. In Luke et al. (2011), a relationship history calendar (adapted from life history calendar methods) was employed to reconstruct a history of sexual relationships and behaviors (see Wieczorek et al., 2020 for guidance on an online implementation). Employing such tools for retrospective data collection, researchers can gain insights into the changes that people report are related to moving in and out of relationships. For example, what other events are reported to be more or less likely to occur in life (e.g., changes in career/employment) prior to or following a relationship transition? How do people's lifestyles (e.g., physical activity, financial spending) change as they transition in and out of singlehood? Researchers may also consider utilizing advanced mobile technologies (e.g., data from fitness, banking, or dating apps) when obtaining such outcomes.

4 | WITHIN-GROUP INVESTIGATION OF SINGLES: DIFFERENCES AMONG SINGLE INDIVIDUALS

What is it and what is it good for? Finally, researchers may gain an understanding of singlehood by examining the lives of currently single people without making any comparisons to their partnered counterparts or partnered time periods (see dashed-lined box in Figure 1). Indeed, research on singlehood deserves attention separate from any comparisons to partnered experiences. Many early qualitative studies adopted this approach, capturing diverse experiences of single individuals through interviews (Baumbusch, 2004; Chasteen, 1994; Lewis & Moon, 1997; Sharp & Ganong, 2007; Stein, 1975). More recent quantitative studies are also increasingly taking this approach, either selectively analyzing single individuals within datasets consisting of partnered and single individuals (Kislev, 2021; Oh et al., 2022; Park et al., 2021) or collecting data selectively targeting those who are currently single (Adamczyk, 2017; Apostolou et al., 2021; Beckmeyer & Jamison, 2023; Sprecher & Felmlee, 2021). This focus on the single population is necessary for studies with a key interest in variables that are only relevant to singles (e.g., reasons for being single, desire for a relationship, perceived pressure for partnering), but can be useful even when the variable is not exclusively relevant to them.

Taking the within-single approach and exclusively examining the single population may be the best way to zoom in on the variety of experiences of singlehood (e.g., life-long singlehood). Indeed, most of what we know about the variability in couples' well-being comes from studies conducted exclusively on partnered individuals, asking the question of who maintains a higher-quality relationship and when. Similarly, an exclusive focus on the single population can broaden the range of variables researchers consider and help capture more diverse aspects of singlehood.

Further, this approach also leaves greater room for exploring variability in the experience of a given outcome. For example, researchers may examine variability as a function of multiple intersectional identities (e.g., experiences among single individuals with different gender, sexual, or religious identities; Girme et al., 2023; Kislev & Marsh, 2023), either by statistically testing the differences (e.g., gender × parental status interaction) or targeting a specific group and examining their experiences in-depth (e.g., different aspects of work and non-work life among working single mothers). Researchers may also examine variability as a function of other important individual differences by identifying sub-populations within singles. For example, drawing on the fundamental social motives framework, Park, MacDonald, Impett, et al. (2023) identified three groups of singles with relatively consistent motivational patterns across three samples: (a) singles with strong independence motives and little interest in affiliation, mating, or status; (b) singles with considerable interest in self-protection as well as social connections and status; and (c) singles with little interest in self-protection or independence but moderate interest in affiliation. These groups differed not only in general well-being outcomes but also in (self-reported) behavioral outcomes.

What are some caveats? One question that often arises following this type of study, especially in cases in which the same research question could be asked to partnered individuals, is whether the phenomenon is unique to single

people. Indeed, there does not seem to be a consensus regarding in which contexts a focus on the single population is justifiable or needed. This is not to say that single individuals should be considered unique in all domains. In fact, it seems essential at this stage of singlehood research that researchers carefully think about whether and when it is necessary to consider single individuals only. Should the generalizability or specificity of the phenomenon be of great importance, researchers may consider examining the same phenomenon in an independent sample of partnered individuals as a direct test (Dennett & Girme, 2023; Park & MacDonald, 2022). For example, Park and MacDonald (2022) found that singles with greater desire for partnered sexual activities reported lower sexual satisfaction, particularly if they were not currently engaging in those activities as often. This finding could be used to point to a unique cost of not having a stable sexual partner for singles, particularly those with greater dyadic sexual desire. However, the same effect was found among partnered individuals, suggesting that what the researchers observed reflects general experiences of frustration from valued but thwarted goals, rather than a particular cost of singlehood per se.

A similar caveat holds when interpreting findings from this approach. Despite the absence of a direct comparison with partnered individuals or periods, this type of research often gives the *illusion* of uniqueness such that researchers may, inadvertently, over-emphasize the implications of the observed findings for understanding singlehood. However, there may be more similarities than differences across relationship status in what promotes and undermines well-being. Indeed, singlehood is a life phase that many people transition in and out of, rather than a lifestyle experienced by an entirely unique group of individuals. To the extent that people carry many of their beliefs, needs, and goals with them into and out of singlehood, what makes for a thriving single life may strongly resemble what makes for a thriving coupled life or thriving life in general. As such, it may be useful to consider that the presence or absence of a romantic relationship may have a stronger influence on the strength of particular needs or ways people fulfill them, rather than categorical differences in the needs themselves. For example, people may value their relationships with family regardless of their current relationship status (Ko et al., 2020), but how they define and connect with their families might be different when single versus partnered (e.g., in terms of the type and frequency of support exchanges; Swartz, 2009).

What's next? One direction the within-group approach would benefit from is incorporating a longitudinal component. A large portion of previous work taking this approach has been cross-sectional, examining intrapersonal, interpersonal, and societal *correlates* of single individuals' well-being. However, how single individuals view and feel about their single life can fluctuate on a monthly, weekly, or even daily level. As such, examining what day-to-day experiences shape single individuals' feelings about singlehood, whether such fluctuations result in behavioral changes, and who experiences greater stability or fluctuations in these feelings are promising questions that require more attention. Of note, this research also has the potential to be extended to uncover characteristics of singlehood that ultimately lead to exiting singlehood (e.g., Park et al., 2021). Insights into how features that make one happy with singlehood can simultaneously facilitate or prevent one's exiting of the status will provide a more nuanced understanding of well-being within singlehood.

Finally, another important question going forward is how representative single individuals participating in a study on *singlehood* are (e.g., do they identify more with single status?). Given that the primary focus of this approach pertains to within-group variability, it is crucial that samples encompass variability that reflects real-world singles. Drawing from previous work in other contexts (e.g., sexuality research; Wiederman, 1999), one could directly examine the existence and nature of self-selection bias in singlehood research, depending on types of recruitment strategies or platforms. Subsequent exploration of effectiveness of available means to mitigate such bias (statistically, e.g., Ferri-García & Rueda, 2020, or methodologically, e.g., Choi et al., 2017) will be informative for future research.

5 | CONCLUSION

In this paper, we considered three broad approaches to studying singlehood and discussed their key aims, strengths, and caveats. This framework is only one of the many ways to think about singlehood research and the distinction drawn between approaches may not always be clear-cut – indeed, a longitudinal study involving single and

coupled people may utilize any, or all, of the three approaches discussed here. Further, another approach that was not discussed here but may help gain insights into singlehood involves studying partnered individuals' perceptions of singlehood. Asking partnered individuals about their own past experiences of singlehood or their desires for it can shed light on aspects of singlehood that may be under-recognized or under-reported by currently single people.

Whichever approach is taken to study singlehood, to establish and maintain the quality and credibility of science in this area, researchers should draw lessons from other fields of psychology and attend to issues of replicability and transparency (Chopik et al., 2020; Hagger, 2019; Tackett & Miller, 2019). Further, across the three approaches, there is a pressing need to incorporate more diverse samples. The growing body of research exploring the lives of singles is not only a reflection of changing lifestyle patterns but arguably also a result of increasing attention (of researchers, academia, and society) to the issue of diversity and intersecting identities more broadly. Yet, ironically, even this new research attention to singlehood has been primarily conducted with an explicit or implicit focus on those pursuing "normative" relational structures (Lavender-Stott, in press). Expanding the composition of the study samples is of importance in this area moving forward, particularly in light of the current discussions regarding the heteronormative bias evident in relationship science in general (McGorray et al., 2023; Thorne et al., 2019).

Finally, although we focused primarily on well-being outcomes in this paper, there are inquiries unrelated to predicting well-being that can yield valuable insights into singlehood. What are some predictors of being (long-term) single (Chopik et al., 2023; Pepping et al., 2018)? What are the varying constellations of life priorities for single individuals and how do they pursue them (Harris, 2023; Hill, 2020; Park & MacDonald, 2023)? How are norms and practices around singlehood changing across generations (Lee, 2019; Vera-Toscano & Meroni, 2021)? And are there broader societal-level antecedents and consequences of such changes (Brzozowska, 2021; Golombok, 2017; Mudrazija et al., 2020; Pessin, 2018)? We hope the current attempt to systematize different ways scholars can advance our understanding of singlehood helps clarify what has been done, what has not been done, and what could be considered in designing and interpreting research moving forward. Ultimately, these approaches complement each other and contribute to a deeper understanding of singlehood.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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