



Research Articles

Social Network Pressure on Women and Men to Enter a Romantic Relationship and Fear of Being Single²

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Abstract

The romantic dyad is emphasized in society, which leads to the question of whether single (non-partnered) adults in emerging adulthood perceive pressure from their social network members to become partnered. The first purpose of this study was to examine the degree of pressure to enter a relationship that single (unattached) men and women perceive that they receive from two social networks (parents/family and friends) and whether there is a gender difference in this degree of pressure to partner. The second purpose was to examine how social pressure to partner is associated with the fear of being single (FOBS). A sample of 616 single (unpartnered) adults ages 18 to 30, primarily from the U.S., reported some degree of network pressure to enter a relationship on average. Greater pressure to become partnered was perceived from parents/family than from friends. Women scored higher than men on an index of social pressure from parents/family to enter a relationship and also higher on an index measuring FOBS. Social network pressure to enter a relationship was associated with a greater FOBS for both men and women.

Keywords: social network pressure, pressure to partner, singlism, fear of being single, dating, social networks, singles, gender nonconforming

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A major task in emerging adulthood is to enter intimate relationships (Erikson, 1980), yet many young adults are single and unattached, that is, not currently involved in a long-term romantic relationship (LeFebvre & Carmack, 2020). In fact, the number of adults in emerging adulthood who are single and unattached has been increasing (Pepping, MacDonald, & Davis, 2018). Despite societal changes in marriage (including an increasing age at first marriage), the U.S. and many other developed societies still emphasize the romantic dyad (Sharp & Keyton, 2016). Common are expectations that young adults will form intimate associations even if such relationships do not result in marriage (Arnett, 2000, 2014). Consequently, adults who are not currently in a romantic relationship may feel pressure to become romantically partnered, with some of that pressure coming from their social networks. That is, single, non-partnered (SNP) adults, particularly in their twenties, may have parents, siblings, and friends who exert pressure on them to enter a relationship.

Because single, unattached people and their singlehood experience have been relatively neglected in research (as noted by Pepping et al., 2018), it is not surprising that we know little about whether today's SNP adults feel pressure from parents, family, and friends to enter a romantic relationship. This study examines whether young SNP adults perceive pressure to partner from their social networks, and whether this pressure may heighten worries about remaining single, as well as whether women are more affected than men by these social processes.

An investigation of social network pressure to enter a romantic partnership, and possible gender differences in that pressure, are important topics for research. Excessive pressure from family and friends could influence emerging adults to enter and maintain relationships that are unsatisfying, or worse, deleterious. If women experience greater social pressure than men, moreover, then women, particularly, may attempt to form or maintain problematic romantic liaisons. However, shifting patterns over time have led to delayed marriage in the U.S., including the rise of individualism, longer education periods, increased prioritization of careers over relationships, and greater acceptance of non-marital forms of unions (e.g., Miller, 2022). These changes may result in less weight placed on young adults (both men and women) to marry—and even partner—than in the past. Perhaps in today's evolving climate, women may not receive higher levels of encouragement to form a committed relationship in comparison to men. Given the lack of scholarly evidence on the topic, however, whether young adults feel pressure to partner, and whether gender differences exist in such pressure, remain open questions.

Although relatively little research has investigated pressure from the social network for singles to become partnered, other influences of social networks on relationships have been studied. Research reveals the numerous ways in which social networks shape relationships, from their very beginnings to their endings. For example, social network members can be instrumental in helping people find a partner, such as providing informal opportunities for meeting others (Sprecher, Felmlee, Orbuch, & Willetts, 2002). In addition, once a relationship develops, it is more likely to survive and be satisfying if there is network support for the relationship (Blair, Holmberg, & Pukall, 2018; Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004; Felmlee, 2001; Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992; Sprecher, Felmlee, Schmeeckle, & Shu, 2006). Social networks can also play a role in couples' motivation and ability to engage in relationship maintenance strategies (Sprecher, Felmlee, Stokes, & MacDaniel, 2020), such as helping pairs to develop a couple identity and facilitating opportunities for pairs to spend fun time together. Network approval for the relationship can also decrease the likelihood of a later relationship breakup especially if the approval is from the woman's networks (Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992).

Social networks can exert influence on the pairing process even before a relationship begins. As Sprecher et al. (2002) speculated, "As agents of the larger society, networks of friends and family often exert pressure on adolescents and young adults to enter romantic relationships" (pp. 261–262). However, the degree to which social networks may influence SNP individuals' desire and readiness to enter a relationship has not been examined systematically. Given the well-established body of research documenting the role of social networks in other aspects of relationship development (Felmlee & Sinclair, 2018), it seems likely that SNP adults also receive reactions from their social networks about their SNP relationship status. Furthermore, and of interest in this study, is the empirical question of whether unattached women feel more social pressure from social networks to find a partner than do unattached men. Next, we consider the reasons social networks may push SNP adults to become partnered and conversely why social networks may sometimes encourage them to

remain unpartnered. Furthermore, we consider whether the reasons for each type of pressure may apply more strongly to one gender than to the other (of the two major genders).

Network Pressure to Partner

If we had conducted this study a few decades ago, we likely would have found that SNP adults at the time would have perceived their social networks (and particularly their family) to encourage and pressure them to be in a relationship and more specifically to marry. In the 1970s, the mean age of first marriage was 21 for women and 23 for men. In comparison, today the ages at first marriage in the U.S. are at the historical high of 28 and 30 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020).

Beginning in the 1980s, studies were conducted to examine how individuals were perceived as a function of their marital status (e.g., never married vs. married). This research revealed that both men and women were evaluated more positively if they were married than if they were unmarried (DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Ganong, Coleman, & Mapes, 1990). The prejudice and discrimination from the larger society directed toward single adults has been called “singlism” and continues today (DePaulo, 2014), including in multiple countries (Slonim, Gur-Yaish, & Katz, 2015). In addition, just being coupled (even if not married) is viewed positively. For example, DePaulo and Morris found that college students judged a target person who was described as being in a relationship more positively than a target person described as being single and not currently in a relationship. Therefore, some of the pressure from social networks for SNP adults to enter a relationship may be a manifestation of this discrimination. Social networks also may encourage SNP adults to enter a romantic relationship in order to protect their friend, adult child, or sibling from societal discrimination even if they themselves do not endorse the singlism stigma. Family and friends may pressure SNP adults to enter a relationship for self-interested reasons, as well, including because they would like the target person to have the same relationship status as their own. This influence may be largely indirect and reflect a homophily principle—that people want to associate with those who are similar (Christakis & Fowler, 2013; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). At the same time, social networks may exert pressure on SNP adults to partner, because they sincerely believe that there are benefits to being in a relationship.

However, there also could be reasons that network members would pressure a SNP adult to remain single and unattached. For example, social network members who are unattached may want the target person (e.g., their friend) to be similar (homophily principle) so that they can have someone with whom to do things. Furthermore, network members could believe that being in a relationship would not be good for their friend (or adult child or sibling) at that particular time. Furthermore, in the context of today’s high divorce rate, family members may avoid encouraging young SNP people to couple, especially at young ages, because of their awareness of the high rates of divorce and breakups. Indeed, research indicates that today’s parents often want their adult children to postpone marriage, although this may be found especially for male adult offspring (Willoughby, Olson, Carroll, Nelson, & Miller, 2012).

Gender and Network Pressure

Social networks remain situated within a social and cultural context that remains highly gendered. We expect gender differences to emerge in the experience of social network pressure, with women more likely than men to receive encouragement and push to form a romantic attachment. As noted by Budgeon (2016), women’s lives are “governed by heteronormative gender norms that place the couple at the heart of the social order”

(p. 402). Although both men and women may face negative stereotypes and stigmatization for not being in a relationship, there is suggestive evidence that women experience this to a greater degree (Budgeon, 2016; DePaulo, 2006; McKeown & Parry, 2019; Simpson, 2016). Moreover, and according to recent research, single women's needs can be ignored in society, even by women's organizations (English, 2019). Given disapproving cultural attitudes, social networks may want to safeguard non-partnered women from possible stigmas and discrimination that could come their way if they remain unattached.

On a social level, it is common for parents to want their offspring to have children, and provide them with grandchildren, in the context of a committed relationship (Barber & Axinn, 1998; Sharp & Ganong, 2011). Due to the "ticking" of women's so-called biological clock, and to traditional gender norms, expectations for child-bearing are likely to manifest themselves in greater parental focus on daughters than sons. Social norms and gender stereotypes that place emphasis on communal for women and agency for men (Eagly, Nater, Miller, Kaufmann, & Sczesny, 2020) also could lead friends and family to assume that women, especially, will desire and benefit from intimate companionship. Young men, on the other hand, may receive extra social encouragement and push to pursue agentic, rather than communal, goals. Network members also could be concerned that in the long run, many women, but not necessarily men, will require additional financial support on the part of a mate due to structural factors, such as continued gender inequalities in the labor market (Shambaugh & Nunn, 2018). Finally, women are more likely than men to seek network support for their relationship in the first place and are more sensitive to network members' opinions about their relationships (Agnew, Loving, & Drigotas, 2001).

A few qualitative studies illustrate the messages that single adults obtain from their social networks, and how these messages can differ for men and women. In a study of students' accounts of the messages that they received from parents about marriage and marital partners, Prather (1990) reported that the women in their sample said their mothers were eager for them to marry (rather than to remain single), whereas the men perceived fewer such messages. In an interview study of 10 women (age 18 to 34) about their single status and reactions from their social environment, Sharp and Ganong (2011) reported that these women received messages from their social networks that their single status was unconventional and perceived pressure to adopt a more conventional path (to partner). In a Canadian interview study with 12 single women not in a relationship, McKeown and Parry (2019) found that many of the participants expressed receiving messages to enter a relationship, that is, messages that reinforced the "ideology of couplehood." Furthermore, in another qualitative study, Pickens and Braun (2018) found that adult single women (aged 25–35) received pressure to enter a relationship. Many participants also reported that they observed gender differences in the message content, such that "women in general are encouraged to prioritize heterosexual relationships whereas men are encouraged to follow more individual desires and freedoms" (p. 443). In other words, the social environment compels women to conform to normative expectations of communal, whereas men are expected to behave in a manner consistent with norms of individual agency.

For a variety of reasons, therefore, several qualitative studies suggest that women are more likely than men to receive pressure from their social ties to develop a romantic relationship or to enter a cohabitational or marital union. This past research on messages received from the social network on romantic relationship status is limited, however, by small samples and generally the absence of men in the samples. Therefore, there is a gap in the literature on whether there are gender differences in the social network pressure that single adults receive to enter a relationship.

Fear of Being Single

In addition, there is a lack of knowledge on the consequences of social pressure to partner. Social network pressure on SNP adults to enter a relationship may affect attitudes about being single and unattached. Recently, a construct referred to as fear of being single (FOBS) has entered the literature. It is defined as “concern, anxiety, or distress regarding the current or prospective experience of being without a romantic partner” (Spielmann et al., 2013, p. 1049). Spielmann et al. (2013) developed a six-item scale to measure the construct, with such items as, “As I get older, it will become harder and harder to find someone.” The scale has been shown to have excellent validity and reliability (Adamczyk et al., 2021; Fonseca, Gouveia, Santos, Couto, & Coelho, 2017; Spielmann et al., 2013), and is associated with, but distinct from, other psychological dispositions such as attachment anxiety (Spielmann et al., 2013; Spielmann, Maxwell, MacDonald, Peragine, & Impett, 2020). Young women may be especially prone to FOBS for the same cultural, normative, biological, and structural reasons discussed above that could lead members of their close ties to push them to find a partner. Some past research has found that women score higher than men on FOBS (e.g., Adamczyk, 2018; Adamczyk et al., 2021).

Thus far, most of the research with the FOBS construct focuses on outcomes of FOBS such as in mate selectivity (Spielmann et al., 2013, 2020) and longing for an ex-partner (Spielmann, MacDonald, Joel, & Impett, 2016), and much less has been done on factors may contribute to FOBS. However, one recent study (Timmermans, Coenen, & Van den Bulck, 2019) examined how an antecedent factor might be associated with FOBS. Researchers studied whether the degree of exposure to romantic television shows and films was associated with a higher FOBS. In their correlational study, they found that the frequency of viewing romantic media was associated with higher scores on the FOBS scale for single women, although not for single men and not for partnered men and women. In addition, FOBS has been found to increase after a breakup (Spielmann et al., 2016) and recently has been found to be increased by fear of COVID-19 (Alexopoulos et al., 2021).

Purposes to This Study

The first purpose of this study was to examine the degree to which SNP adults feel pressure from their social networks to enter a romantic relationship and whether the degree of social pressure to enter a relationship depends on gender of the participant and the sector of the social network (family vs. friends). Based on the research discussed previously, we expected to find that the social push to enter a romantic relationship will be greater from the family network than from the friendship network (H1) and greater for women than for men (H2). We also explore whether gender differences in pressure to enter a relationship depends on the social network (RQ1).

Second, we examine whether the participants' perceived pressure from their social network to enter a relationship is associated with inflated worries and fears surrounding singlehood. We hypothesized that greater perceived pressure from social networks to enter a relationship would be associated with higher scores on FOBS (H3). The results from Timmermans et al. (2019) suggest that we would find women's FOBS will be more highly linked to a contextual variable such as network pressure than will men's FOBS, which also will be explored (RQ2).

Method

Sample and Procedure

The sample consisted of 616 single (unpartnered) emerging adults. Of this sample, 213 (34.6%) were men and 403 (65.4%) were women. Participants were obtained in diverse ways, including from a U.S. Midwest public university (~47%), Amazon's Mechanical Turk (~12%), a snowball sample collected by assistants who posted the survey on social media (~25%), and other online venues (~10%). The final sample for analysis ranged in age from 18 to 30, with a mean age of 22.03 ($SD = 2.91$). The mean age was slightly older for men ($M = 22.85$, $SD = 3.12$) than for women, $M = 21.60$, $SD = 2.70$; $t(614) = 5.15$, $p < .001$, and as a result, age will be controlled in the analyses examining gender differences. Of the participants, 76.1% ($n = 451$) identified themselves as White, 11.3% ($n = 67$) reported Black, 7.1% ($n = 42$) reported Latino/Hispanic, and the remaining 33 participants indicated Asian, Other, or did not answer the question (For more information about the sample, including decisions about inclusions and exclusions, see the [Supplementary Materials](#)).

Measures

The participants completed a survey (either paper or online) about several aspects of being single and unattached. The survey received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from the first author's university. Data on other topics assessed in the survey have been presented elsewhere (e.g., Author Citations). Below, we describe the measures used for this study.

Pressure From the Social Network

Participants were asked two questions about the pressure they received about their relationship status from each of two social networks—*parents/family* and *friends*. Both items for each network were designed to have high face validity for measuring network pressure to enter a relationship. One question was phrased: "How much pressure do you receive from [network name] to be in a relationship?"). The item was followed by a 7-point response scale with the anchors, 1 = *none at all*, 4 = *moderate*, and 7 = *a great deal*. The second item for each network sector was: "Overall, do you think your [network name] prefers more that you remain single and unattached or that you be in a relationship?" A 7-point response scale followed this item with the anchors, 1 = *prefer more that I am single and unattached*, 4 = *indifferent or no reaction*, and 7 = *prefer more that I am in a relationship*.

From the two items for each social network, a total index of *social pressure to enter a relationship* was created. First, however, the second item (for each network) was recoded so that the responses that referred to pressure to remain single (1, 2, and 3) and the midpoint (4) of no reaction were recoded as 1, 5 was recoded as 3, 6 was recoded as 5, and 7 remained as 7 (so that this item was weighted in a similar way to the first item). The two items (once the second item was recoded) were correlated, both for family network pressure ($r = .54$, $p < .001$) and for friend network pressure ($r = .49$, $p < .001$).

Fear of Remaining Single

Spielmann et al.'s (2013) six-item *Fear of Being Single* scale was included to measure the participants' fear of remaining single and being without a romantic partner. Example items include: "It scares me to think that there might not be anyone out there for me" and "If I end up alone in life, I will probably feel like there is something

wrong with me." Participants responded to each item on a 1 = *not at all true* to 7 = *very true* response scale. The total composite score was represented by the mean of the six items, and a higher score indicated greater fear of remaining single ($\alpha = .85$).

Results

Pressure to Become Partnered: Effects of Type of Social Network and Gender of Participant

Descriptive statistics for the total sample, for each item and the total index, are presented in Table 1. First, we note that the overall pressure that our participants received to enter a romantic relationship was only slight to moderate. However, the participants scored the full range on the indices, ranging from some who experienced absolutely no pressure to partner, to some who had the highest possible pressure (i.e., a score of 7).

Table 1

Perceived Pressure to Enter a Relationship From Two Social Networks: Descriptive Statistics for Total Sample

Item	From parents/family		From friends	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Item 1—Pressure received to be in a relationship ^a	2.79	1.82	2.46	1.66
Item 2 (recoded)—Pressure received to be in a relationship (vs. to be single/unattached) ^b	2.27	2.01	1.70	1.50
Total Index of Network Pressure to Partner	2.53	1.68	2.08	1.36

Note. *M* = mean; *SD* = standard deviation.

^aA 7-point response scale followed this item that had the anchors: 1 = *none at all*, 4 = *moderate*, and 7 = *a great deal*. ^bA 7-point response scale followed this item that had the anchors: 1 = *prefer more that I am single and unattached*, 4 = *indifferent or no reaction*, and 7 = *prefer more that I be in a relationship*. The means presented here are for the recoded item, such that responses on the original item between 1 and 4 = 1, 5 = 3, 6 = 5, and 7 = 7. This was done so that the item was weighted in the same way as the first item before being combined into a composite.

To examine whether the social pressure to enter a relationship might depend on the type of social network in combination with gender of participant, we conducted a mixed ANCOVA, with the total index of network pressure to partner as the dependent variable, type of social network pressure (parents/family vs. friends) as the within-subject variable, and gender as the between-subjects variable. Age was included as a covariate in the analysis to more accurately isolate the gender effect (because, as reported earlier, the mean age for men and women in this sample differed).

In this analysis, type of social network pressure was significant, Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.99$, $F(1, 613) = 6.95$, $p = .009$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.011$. As indicated by scores on the total indices (see Table 1), more pressure to enter a relationship was perceived from family than from friends, in support of H1. The between-subject variable, gender (controlling for age), was not significant, $F(1, 613) = 3.10$, $p = .079$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.005$; thus, H2 was not supported. However, the gender \times type of network pressure interaction, Wilks' $\Lambda = 0.99$, $F(1, 613) = 4.33$, $p = .038$, partial $\eta^2 = 0.0007$, was found to be significant (RQ1). The index of parents/family pressure to partner was significantly higher for women ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 1.72$) than for men ($M = 2.42$, $SD = 1.59$), whereas the total

index of friend pressure to partner was very similar for men ($M = 2.10$, $SD = 1.35$) and women ($M = 2.07$, $SD = 1.37$). See the Appendix for additional analyses, including a gender comparison of the individual items.

Predicting Fear of Being Single

Next, we examined whether social network pressure to enter a relationship (represented by the total indices) was associated with FOBS. In the first regression model (see Table 2), only the index of pressure to partner from parents/family and the index of pressure to partner from friends were included as the predictor variables. As can be seen in the table, both indices (and pressure from friends to a greater degree) were associated with higher scores on FOBS, in support of H3. In a second model, gender was included as well (controlling for age of participant). The social network pressure indices continued to be significantly associated with FOBS, controlling for gender. Furthermore, gender was predictive of scores on FOBS, with women scoring higher.

Table 2

Regression Results Predicting Fear of Being Single From Perceived Pressure to Partner From Two Social Networks and Gender

Predictor	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3 ^b		
	β	<i>p</i>	95% CI for β	β	<i>p</i>	95% CI for β	β	<i>p</i>	95% CI for β
Index of pressure from parents and family to be in a relationship	0.089	.036	[.005, .152]	0.103	.016	[.017, .164]	0.144	.052	[-.001, .256]
Index of pressure from friends to be in a relationship	0.167	< .001	[.091, .271]	0.176	< .001	[.102, .279]	0.312	< .001	[.191, .487]
Gender (female) ^a	--	--	--	0.147	< .001	[.214, .699]	0.144	< .001	[.206, .689]
Gender × Index of pressure from parents/family	--	--	--	--	--	--	-0.040	.586	[-.197, .111]
Gender × Index of pressure from friends	--	--	--	--	--	--	-0.169	.017	[-.409, -.041]
<i>R</i> ²	.05			.09			.10		
<i>F</i> (2, 613)	14.87, <i>p</i> < .001			14.48, <i>p</i> < .001			11.02, <i>p</i> < .001		

Note. CI = confidence interval.

^aRepresented as a dummy variable, where males = 0 and females = 1, controlling for age of participant. ^bThe index variables were centered in the model.

In a third model, we included the interaction between gender and pressure from parents/family and the interaction between gender and pressure from friends (after centering the index variables), to address RQ2. These analyses show whether the association of social pressure to partner from each social network with FOBS was moderated by gender. The interaction term between gender and the index score on pressure from friends was significant in the prediction of FOBS. Follow-up analyses indicated that there was a stronger association between pressure from friends to partner and scores on FOBS for men ($r = .33$, $p < .001$) than for women ($r = .14$, $p = .006$).

Discussion

Our study of emerging, single adults who were unpartnered began by addressing the question as to whether they perceived pressure from social network members to enter a romantic relationship. The answer to this question appears to be “yes, some pressure,” and significantly more from parents and family than from friends. It is not surprising that the social network is viewed to impart some degree of pressure on emerging adults to form relationships. One of the main tasks of this stage in the life course is to form an intimate relationship (Erikson, 1980), and historically parents and families have wielded considerable influence in this process. Furthermore, social networks represent potent factors in the unfolding of intimate relationships over time and shape relationships in multiple ways. Other research suggests that family and friends help individuals to locate a potential partner (Sprecher et al., 2002), choose whom to date (Wright & Sinclair, 2012), enhance satisfaction and relationship stability over time by providing support for relationships (e.g., Etcheverry & Agnew, 2004; Felmlee, 2001; Sprecher & Felmlee, 1992), and influence relationship maintenance (Sprecher et al., 2020). The finding reported herein represents one additional, and noteworthy, manner by which the social environment may attempt to influence individuals and processes of coupling.

Motivations behind encouraging young people to partner likely vary, and some of these could be well-meaning and intended to benefit the target. For example, network members may believe altruistically that a committed relationship will offer distinct rewards for an individual who appears to be avoiding a promising relationship after a painful breakup. Such a motivation suggests the following question: Is this form of network pressure always detrimental? At least theoretically, there could be circumstances in which such encouragement could benefit the target. Perhaps a young person who is shy about romantic relationships receives just the right amount of push to reach out or respond to a potential mate, and subsequently forms a relationship that becomes satisfying and fulfilling. Network members also may be better predictors of what constitutes a long-lasting relationship than the involved individuals themselves (e.g., Felmlee, Sprecher, & Bassin, 1990). Relationship advice from well-informed and caring friends and family members, in other words, is not necessarily a bad thing.

Yet others from the social environment may pressure young adults to partner because of anticipated rewards to themselves, such as future grandchildren for parents or the promise of shared dating experiences for a friend. These types of rationales focus on advantages for the network member rather than for the targeted young adult. If such motives dominate, it is doubtful that the target of such pressure will benefit greatly. The practice of “singlism,” in which unattached adults are subject to stigmas and discrimination (DePaulo & Morris, 2005), also likely contributes to push from the social network to form a romantic partnership, due to prejudicial beliefs in the preeminence of marriage or a partnership over singlehood. This last brand of environmental pressure, based on network members’ biases and trepidations, could instill similar fears of remaining single in the targeted individuals. This type of network meddling could prove particularly detrimental if that fear leads to indiscriminate, unsatisfying romantic pairings on the part of the young adult.

At the same time, note that the average degree of pressure to become partnered, even from parents/family, was not large in magnitude. It is not the case that close ties routinely engaged in intense efforts to alter a young adult’s behavior, according to participants. A number of factors likely contribute to the relatively limited effect of social pressure on relationship formation. The increasing age of first marriage in our society, the fear of divorce, and the stress on independence, for example, could dampen the degree of force exerted by network members

for single emerging adults to become partnered. As a result, many participants report experiencing network pressure, but at relatively low levels, on average. Although network members may exert social pressure on emerging adults to enter a romantic relationship, this pressure is much more limited than was likely the case in previous decades.

Gender differences emerged in the analyses, with women perceiving more pressure to form a relationship than did men, particularly from parents and family (while controlling for age) as expected. These findings corroborate those of previous, qualitative studies (e.g., [Pickens & Braun, 2018](#); [Prather, 1990](#)). A number of concerns could impel parents and family members to encourage young women to develop a romantic tie, including cultural stigmas that are unique to single women, as well as gender stereotypes, structural inequality, and biological impediments to late childbearing for women. In addition, young women have been found to respond more than young men to the opinions of their social network ([Agnew et al., 2001](#)), which could make them more susceptible to outside influence.

Historically, women across the globe faced few options other than marriage, due largely to a husband's role in providing financial security and to marriage as the approved institution for the raising of children ([Kooli & Muftha, 2020](#)). Normative expectations for women to marry were dominant in times past. More options exist for women in the U.S. today regarding singlehood, but at the same time, our study finds that women still face more social encouragement to partner than do men, suggesting that vestiges of entrenched beliefs continue to shape gendered attitudes.

Finally, we found that pressure from both friends and parents/family to enter a relationship (controlling for age and gender) was associated with FOBS, a relatively new construct in the relationship literature. Moreover, our analysis of FOBS uncovered one unexpected finding. The association between pressure from friends to partner and FOBS was stronger for men than for women. Although it is difficult to know without more data what may explain this differential association, we can speculate that the stronger association for men might be due to the relative rarity of perceiving such a push from friends, which could inflate men's concerns about remaining single. Young men may be less accustomed than women to receiving that type of relationship advice from their close peers, whereas both men and women may be unsurprised by family members weighing in on their romantic options. Research is needed to see whether unusualness of network pressure does play a part in triggering FOBS.

The link that we uncovered between environmental pressure to partner and singlehood anxiety has implications for young adults' intimate relationships. Previous work shows that the FOBS is a predictor of a person's likelihood of settling for less in a romantic relationship, with greater dependence on unsatisfying relationships and less selectivity in romantic interest ([Spielmann et al., 2013](#)). Perhaps high levels of pressure from one's social environment to form a partnership compel some young adults to worry about remaining unpartnered, which could lead them to develop unsatisfying relationship behaviors. In our study, women reported higher levels of FOBS than did men, even while controlling for social pressure and age, highlighting the likely role of societal expectations in exacerbating women's anxiety regarding singlehood. If FOBS leads women to romanticize marriage, furthermore, such idealization could limit their future educational and occupational goals (i.e., "The Glass Slipper effect"; [Rudman & Heppen, 2003](#)).

Limitations and Future Research

Although our study has several strengths, it also has limitations. Our sample was neither small, nor limited to college students, yet it was a convenience, non-random sample of young adults. As such, findings need to be replicated with additional, representative data. Our project also relied on self-reports from participants regarding their network's attitudes. Studies could benefit from gaining information directly from the social network members regarding pressure they place on a young person. Moreover, estimates for men in the analyses could be less precise than those for women, given the smaller proportion of the sample who were men.

The study design focused on a limited number of variables. Alternative control variables would be useful in future work, such as information regarding the distribution of singles versus partnered friends in one's friendship network; perhaps those with many, already partnered friends experience heightened anxiety regarding singlehood. We did not control for several variables likely to be correlated with FOBS, such as attachment anxiety and neuroticism, and their inclusion could alter findings. At the same time, however, [Spielmann et al. \(2013\)](#) found evidence that the FOBS construct adds an additional element in accounting for outcomes, above and beyond that of related measures, such as attachment anxiety.

A promising topic for future research would be to investigate the underlying factors that contribute to the gender differences in social network pressure. To what degree does singlism play a part? Do parents still expect daughters, more than sons, to provide them with grandchildren? Or do well-meaning intentions and protectiveness on the part of family and friends shape reactions to young women? It also would be important to examine how the experience of network pressure directed toward single women (and men) varies by social class, race, and culture ([Bay-Cheng & Goodkind, 2016](#)), as well as by religion, financial status, and level of education. Women from privileged class, race, education, and cultural backgrounds may face unique challenges, for instance, such as the expectation that they not only partner, but partner with someone from a similar, elevated socioeconomic segment of the population. On the other hand, advantaged women, as well as men, may anticipate promising opportunities to meet a potential mate in the future, and opportunities that are less available to those from more humble circumstances.

Finally, the intriguing role of the social environment in heightening fears towards singlehood deserves further attention. Priming studies could provide one possible forum for further exploration of this important issue. Participants in a priming study could be assigned at random to describe actual experiences in which their single status is either discouraged or reinforced by network members, for example, and then later asked to complete the FOBS scale (for an example of a priming study inducing FOBS, see [Spielmann & Cantarella, 2020](#)). Such a study could reveal whether memories of reactions from one's social environment can alternatively heighten, or reduce, levels of fear associated with remaining single.

Practice Implications

Young adults who remain single are growing in numbers in recent years ([Pepping et al., 2018](#)), and yet our findings suggest that those in emerging adulthood continue to experience some degree of pressure from family and friends to begin a romantic relationship. Such pressure is associated with higher levels of FOBS. The results provided herein can be used to inform counselors and educators to develop guidelines in addressing this type of anxiety in individuals. Those who encounter hassles from their social network members regarding their single status could benefit from an awareness of the common nature of this phenomenon. Such knowledge could aid

professionals in framing procedures to confront the challenging situation of navigating individual preferences and family expectations. Finally, women are apt to be particularly vulnerable to anxiety, because they are higher in FOBS in the first place, compounded by their significantly greater levels of perceived pressure from family members to partner. Therefore, women may require additional assistance in terms of learning to manage this type of anxiety in order to avoid possible adverse, future ramifications.

Conclusion

In conclusion, emerging adulthood remains a period in which individuals are embedded within the close social connections of parents, family, and friends, which influence them in multiple ways. Here we see that these important social ties, particularly those of parents and family, appear to place some pressure on singles to form a relationship. Women are especially targeted in this manner. Low degrees of social network pressure likely impart little stress, and perhaps could represent the nudge needed to lead certain individuals into a rewarding partnership. On the other hand, our results suggest that greater levels of this type of social network stress from friends and family could increase someone's fear of singlehood, which might have subsequent, adverse effects on their relationships. Women, who face elevated levels of pressure from their social environment, could be at a heightened risk of problematic consequences.

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Competing Interests

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Supplementary Materials

For this article the following Supplementary Materials are available via PsychArchives (for access see [Index of Supplementary Materials](#) below):

- Additional information related to the Sample and Method.
- Additional information related to the Results.

Index of Supplementary Materials

Sprecher, S., & Felmlee, D. (2021). *Supplementary materials to: Social network pressure on women and men to enter a romantic relationship and fear of being single* [Additional information]. PsychOpen GOLD.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.23668/psycharchives.5281>

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