

How You Treat Others May Depend on Whether You're Single or Attached

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With Valentine's Day looming, many married couples will wish marital bliss for their single friends. At the same time, many singles will pity their coupled friends' loss of freedom. People like to believe that their way of life — whether single or coupled — is the best for everyone, especially if they think their relationship status is unlikely to change, according to a study forthcoming in [Psychological Science](#), a journal of the [Association for Psychological Science](#).

The study suggests that this bias may influence how we treat others, even in situations where relationship status shouldn't matter.

Research shows that feeling “stuck” within a particular social system leads people to justify and rationalize that system. Researchers Kristin Laurin of the Graduate School of Business at Stanford University and David Kille and Richard Eibach of the University of Waterloo wondered whether this kind of rationalization might also apply to a person's relationship status.

“We often become evangelists for our own lifestyles,” the researchers observe. “When it comes to our relationship status, we are rarely content to simply say ‘being single works for me’ or ‘being in a relationship suits my disposition.’”

Ironically, people may idealize their own status as a way of dealing with the unsatisfactory aspects of that status. Laurin and colleagues hypothesized that this would happen most often when people think their relationship status won't change.

And this is exactly what they found. Their first study revealed that the more stable participants considered their relationship status to be, the more they idealized that status as a norm for others to follow. This applied to both single and coupled participants, regardless of how personally happy they were with their status.

For their second study, the researchers decided to take advantage of Valentine's Day, an annual event that seems to put everyone's relationship status front and center.

They recruited participants on Valentine's Day and asked them to imagine a Valentine's Day evening for a hypothetical person of the same gender, Nicole or Nick.

Participants who judged their own relationship status to be stable imagined that Nicole/Nick would have a happier and more fulfilling Valentine's Day if s/he had the same status as them; they gave less positive judgments when Nicole/Nick's relationship status was different from theirs.

To investigate whether this bias might influence how we actually behave toward others, Laurin and

colleagues conducted two more studies, this time experimentally manipulating perceived stability.

Participants who were led to perceive greater stability in their relationship status judged same-status job candidates more positively, although they weren't more likely to hire them. Participants were more likely to vote for a same-status political candidate, however, when they had information that gave them an excuse to express their bias.

When the data from all four studies were combined into one analysis, the results showed that perceived stability led both coupled and single participants to treat others like them more favorably.

The fact that this relationship bias can influence our behavior towards others is significant:

“People may be aware of their own tendency to idealize being single or coupled, but they may not realize that this can impact how they respond to others — and how others respond to them,” the researchers observe.

Given well-documented cultural prejudice against singles, Laurin and her colleagues expected that coupled people would have no trouble rationalizing their status, but they were more surprised to see that this effect was just as strong for single people.

According to the researchers, this study is “the first to show relationship-specific patterns of prejudice whereby both single and coupled people favor others who share their relationship status over those who don't.”

As a next step, the researchers plan to explore whether people idealize other aspects of their lives, such as the decisions they've made, the type of community they live in, or the career path they've chosen.