

# Intersections of Gender, Sexuality, Race and Age in the Privileging of Coupledness

 Kate Gilchrist author pic

Kate Gilchrist graduated from the LSE's Gender Institute in December 2014 with an MSc in Gender. As well as freelancing as a sub-editor and writer on a wide range of national and international magazines and journals, she has volunteered for several gender-rights based organisations in the UK, Central America and Asia. She also on the editing team of [www.genderandthecity.com](http://www.genderandthecity.com).

Earlier this year LSE held an **event** to commemorate the sociologist **Ulrich Beck**. Beck was prominent in developing the theory of reflexive modernity and the related concept of the transformation of intimacy. Such a theory suggests that postmodern society is characterised by diversification, freedom and fluidity within intimate relationships where non-traditional forms of love are being reflexively constructed into '**elective affinities**'. Yet singledom, defined here as an intimate life not organised by a serious or long-term, monogamous relationship, remains – 20 years on from Beck – inherently deprivileged within relationship discourses. Indeed, the coupledness/singledom divide is firmly in place and little eroded. As Budgeon describes

hetero coupledness is still dominant and central, though critiqued from the margins. **Shelley Budgeon**

Recent media representation of two heterosexual celebrity weddings, as well as the work of two artists offer interesting examples of how such discourses continue to operate, and how such deprivileging is produced at the intersections of gender, sexuality, age and race.

Examining the recent media portrayal of two celebrities' nuptials – George Clooney and Jennifer Aniston – demonstrates the deprivileging of non-coupled lives at the intersection of gender, sexuality, race and age. Both marriages are overwhelmingly celebrated, working to devalue singledom and elevate **marriage** as the pinnacle of a 'successful' life and the gold standard of relationships. However, the events occur in starkly contrasting ways in each case, revealing the complexity of the single/couple dichotomy. Clooney's crossover into married status is framed in terms of capture, while Aniston's is portrayed as a form of escape and refuge.

## Protection, promiscuity and age

A recurring theme in the media portrayal of Clooney and Alamuddin's wedding is promiscuity and the ensuing 'protection' therefrom that long-term coupledness (at least publically) represents. At the time, much of the media coverage took a playful, celebratory look at Clooney's previous relationships which were primarily sexualized, and **presented** his former romantic partners as a long line of impressive sexual conquests. Alamuddin, a successful international human rights barrister who has a career, money and status entirely independent from the actor, was represented only in relation to him, as the 'wife of George Clooney' and still within the context of her physical appearance. At best, her career and intellect was presented as notable for its **exception** to the 'norm'.

And while this explicitly male, heterosexual promiscuity was thus celebrated in the younger George Clooney, it is constrained as he enters his 50s, with the idea that his promiscuity must inevitably eventually be curtailed. The idolisation of his *younger* bachelor lifestyle, only serves to shore up the celebration of his marriage as a form of capture or **taming** by his wife. The Independent describes Alamuddin as literally '**tying him down**'. It marks the 'proper', successful curtailment of his roving eye (or suggestions of **non-heterosexuality**) that heterosexual marriage represents. It was a timing that Clooney got just right. Like all good dichotomies, promiscuity is

sustained by its opposite: the institution of marriage. If marriage hadn't followed, he would have failed. Such is the measure of his 'success', as more than six months on his public appearances are **still framed** by the media in terms of his marriage. Such discourses posit that Clooney made the ultimate – yet necessary – sacrifice: surrendering the pleasures of single life for the 'good' of marriage. His status as white and heterosexual also works to privilege his former promiscuity and conversion into marriage. Had he been black or a gay man (both of which groups have been negatively associated with an extreme, hyper-promiscuity) it is much less likely he would have enjoyed such coverage. For example fear of the negative impact that sexual orientation alone may have on a-list stars' **'mainstream appeal'** is perhaps reflected in lack of openly gay male big-name Hollywood actors, rendering them invisible, and far from celebrated.

## Escape and refuge

While Aniston is a little younger than Clooney, at 46, media coverage has portrayed Aniston's nuptials as a long-awaited, **overdue** 'life-raft' rescuing her from spending a life adrift as a single older woman. Instead of being constructed as *solely* a cause of celebration like Clooney's, her marriage carries with it an overwhelming sense of relief. It is an escape from the high price women pay for older singledom. For women, promiscuity is largely constructed as a **deviant female identity**, yet this is acutely intersected with age, with older heterosexual women often being granted no sexual agency, or having their sexuality completely erased. So for Aniston, her marriage is not constructed in relation to promiscuity/monogamy dichotomy. Her former relationships are not idealised, they are wholly desexualized and presented as a **melancholy list** of failed potential husbands rather than sexual conquests. If she had been slightly younger she may have been accorded some sexual agency prior to, or part of the process of seeking a husband, as long as she was careful to appear not *too* promiscuous.

Safe within the refuge of marriage, Aniston has also escaped the risk of being an older woman in a relationship with a younger male. This is a notable exception to the invisibility of older female sexuality. Older female sexuality has been pejoratively portrayed, 'othered' and dehumanised in the figure of the animalistic **'cougar'**. No wonder the media portrayal of her impending wedding is so celebratory. Indeed such sexual stereotyping would be afforded to Aniston regardless of her age if she were not white, with black female sexuality consistently presented across all ages, as **hypersexualised**. Thus it must be noted that her identity as a single woman is accorded some social advantage in respect to race. Not only does she avoid being associated with promiscuity, with her previous relationships merely framed as husband-hunting rather than sexual deviance, her **whiteness** is also privileged within wedding narratives.

## Happy families

The gendering of singledom is an idea more playfully called out by the work of US artist Suzanne Heintz, who has constructed her own nuclear family using a set of mannequins – a male and two children. Heintz describes how the idea for **'Life once Removed'** came from questioning by family, friends and acquaintances once she reached a certain age as to why she did not have a long-term partner/husband or children. Heintz's work spotlights how singledom, specifically feminised singledom, is still being constructed firmly as a negative **'deficit identity'** or a fundamental lack, which must be accounted for.

Heintz's work recreates 'picture perfect' scenes of the white, middle class, heterosexual family supposedly brings a form of **happiness** she is apparently 'missing out' on, with the mannequins beautifully embodying the hollowness of such staged perfection. As these are shop mannequins, usually seen in shop windows, her work highlights how such imagery of the perfect family life is deeply commercialised within Western society.

In one scene from a video, "Happy holidays" she stops to look into a window display featuring a family gathered at Christmas, and sees a male mannequin and two children behind the glass who are identical to her 'husband and children', glancing between both, discomfort flickers across her

face. Are the mannequins arranged in order to mimic us, in their scene of (highly commercialised) domestic bliss, or, as we stare into shop windows, are we actually trying to mimic them?

Underscoring her often-humorous work is a more significant point – her work is not just critiquing the ideal of the nuclear family but the idea that there is only one successful life:

this notion of insufficiency is not just about me, nor exclusively about women in regards to marriage. It's about anyone whose life doesn't look the way it 'should' **Suzanne Heintz**

## Celebrating single?

Indeed the question of whether the independent construction of singledom as a positive non-outsider identity is actually achievable continues to challenge many, both **within** (see also **here** and **here**) and outside academia. It is a point taken up, perhaps somewhat inadvertently, by Tracey Emin in her recent exhibition '**The last great adventure is you**'. Emin **describes** the impetus behind her work as celebrating her single status:

I'm very much alone and wanting to celebrate that. It doesn't mean I'm maudlin. I've got to make plans for the future alone. **Tracey Emin**

She added that turning 50 last year had changed her thinking: "It's a bit of a landmark." She said that as they got older, couples considered retirement or moving to the country. "When you're on your own, you can't make those plans. But you have to make plans."

The fact that she *has* to assert her singledom as being positive as opposed to "maudlin" demonstrates it is still a marginal view. Coupledness remains the **central reference point**, a norm which only becomes more focal with age. Emin describes how she has no path set out for her to follow as an older single woman and she must construct her own, demonstrating again not only the invisibility of alternatives to coupledness but an inability to claim what Plummer describes as '**intimate citizenship**'.

And while the legalisation of marriage for same-sex couples in the UK does recognise a less partial, more democratic form of intimacy, indicating perhaps some transformation of intimacy, I would argue that it also merely extends and continues to sustain the formalised couple/single dichotomy. While the penalties of not entering into the hierarchy of coupledness (where marriage sits at the top, but civil partnership and long-term monogamy follow closely) are larger for those who are not members of the 'correct' gender, sexuality, age or racial categories, they nonetheless apply to all, to varying degrees, who whether by choice or not, are single. While overall I would argue that it may be true that some limited groups have experienced a modicum of 'transformation' or **chaos**, by applying an intersectional analysis we can see the significant limits of Beck's theory. Thus there still remains a significant proportion of people who, while they may have their lives filled with other forms of love, are, in the hierarchy of social capital, left out in the cold.

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