

Adriana Savu*

‘THEY HAD LIVED FOR NOTHING IN THIS WORLD’: LINGUISTIC AND SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CONSIDERATIONS ON A HISTORICALLY STIGMATISED MARITAL STATUS

ABSTRACT: Existence outside of marriage associated, especially in the case of women, with the lack of children carries an almost universal stigma. It has historically been perceived as a violation of social norms and a danger to local communities and states. In the latest couple of decades, a growing number of studies focused on the stereotypes and stigma of singlehood, but not many of them addressed the issues of stereotype formation and the etiology of stigma related to never-married people. This paper explores the relationship between Romanian terms referring to never-married people and the local socio-demographic context from a historical perspective. It also makes a few cultural-comparative remarks to show that, as it is said, language mirrors culture and society. The number and the linguistic form of the available words for men and women who did not marry reflect society’s concerns at one point in time or another. The way the language is used affects the persistence of category representation and the consensualisation of stereotypes. Finally, this paper supports the idea that historical, multidisciplinary and comparative approaches provide a better understanding of social and cultural realities.

KEYWORDS: never-married, language, stigma etiology, Romania.

I feel ashamed when patients ask me: ‘Are these your children?’ I have some pictures of other people’s children posted in my office. I’m ashamed to say that I’m not even married. [...] It is as society has asked you to achieve something and you haven’t. (B., 52)¹

Introduction

At the end of the 19th century, a distinguished ethnographer listed the purposes of marriage for Romanians as follows: 1) to have a partner in life to share the good and the bad with; 2) to have legitimate descendants to carry on the name, provide caregiving in old age, keep the postmortem feasts, and pray for their souls after death; 3) to not be told that they had lived for nothing in this world (Marian 1890). The last reason represents an expression of a cultural stereotype and a stigma that persists to this day in Romanian society, in more or less subtle ways.

Most countries around the world are pro-marriage societies. Living outside marriage associated, especially in the case of women, with the lack of children carries an almost

* **Adriana Savu** – National University of Political Studies and Public Administration, Bucharest, Romania; e-mail: adriana.savu@drd.snsa.ro; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6670-628X>.

¹ From a 2018 interview held by the author of this article with an unmarried woman resident in Bucharest.

universal stigma. Over the last couple of decades, a growing number of scholars have studied the stereotypes and stigma of being single in different cultures (Byrne 2000; Byrne & Carr 2005; DePaulo & Morris 2005; DePaulo 2006; Ntoimo & Isiugo-Abanihe 2014; Lahad 2017). Singlehood has historically been perceived as a violation of social norms, a danger to local communities and states. Nevertheless, some Western countries have a long history of singlehood, as well as of feminist movements led by single and never-married women who brought the institution of marriage under scrutiny and criticism (Freeman & Klaus 1984; Moran 2004; Cruea 2005).

Romania has never known any alternative discourse to that of the family as the fundamental cell of society and nation. Ever since the beginning of the 19th century, when national and modernisation projects were launched in the Romanian Principalities, discourses, policies and social practices have focused on idealising and promoting marriage and motherhood while combating any tendency to evade them (Savu 2019). In today's post-communist Romania, after three decades of significant social and demographic changes, including a constant growth in the number of single and never-married people (Rotariu, Dumănescu & Hărăguş 2017; Savu 2019), Romanian scholars still pay very little attention to unmarried individuals², least of all to the never-married ones. The latter are only partially visible in statistics and historical accounts (Savu 2019) while remaining targets of microaggressions in media and everyday encounters. In Romania, probably more so than in other countries, since there is no real debate on this topic, the stereotyping and stigmatisation of never-married individuals has gone largely unrecognised, unstudied and unchallenged.

There are no empirical studies on biases, stereotypes, and stigma related to never-married Romanians. While acknowledging the need for further systematic and standardised research on the matter, this paper proposes an alternative way of approaching the stereotypes and stigma related to this social category. It sets out with the ideas that we can 'write "the present as history"' (Sweezy, cited in Mills 2000) and that the lexicon serves as a 'key to culture' (Bliese 1970). The paper explores the relationship between language and socio-demographic contexts from a historical perspective. It argues that by looking into the origins of the stereotypes and stigma attached to single and never-married people the current beliefs and attitudes towards these individuals can be better understood and explained. Drawing on some more recent studies on stereotypes, stigma, and the role of language in the consensualisation of stereotypes, this paper investigates the etymological roots and the usage of the Romanian terms that refer to never-married men and women. Several comparative examples are offered to

² An exception is represented by single parents, although they are studied exclusively as 'mono-parental families', this being evidence of the prevalence of familism in Romanian society.

stress the intricate relations between language, demographics, social perceptions and negative stereotyping.

Stigma, stereotypes, and language

Linguists and anthropologists have long argued that linguistic and lexical data are important to understand 'a culture's interests and concerns' (Bliese 1970, p. 4). Social psychologists have stressed the role of language in the construction and maintenance of stereotypes and stigmas, as well as the importance of assuming a historical perspective.

According to Stafford and Scott (1986, p. 80), 'stigma is a characteristic of persons that is contrary to a norm of a social unit', a synonym of deviance, and it involves social control efforts. While stigmatisation can be seen as a form of stereotyping and labeling (Scott & Miller 1986), the strongest negative stereotypes seem to evolve around the most disliked and devalued groups or categories, the stigmatised ones (Schneider 2004).

Although the stereotypes and stigmas have been studied for many decades, only rather recently has the issue of their historical and cultural origins started to be addressed more explicitly (Stangor & Crandall 2000; Blum 2004; Schneider 2004; Knights 2014). Some authors stress the importance of considering stereotypes as complex entities that can be traced back in time and followed through history until the present (Knights 2014). Stereotypes, especially those widely accepted, are deeply rooted in culture, they are considered 'part of the cultural air that we breathe' (Schneider 2004, p. 321). They often operate without us realising it and influence not only how we judge others but also how we perceive ourselves. To understand their cultural significance, we must be aware of the social and historical context in which they were formed (Blum 2004).

Stangor and Crandall (2000) argue that although some attributes are universally stigmatising, stigma is always locally and culturally constructed. In their view, stigma has an initial function related to the perception of a tangible or symbolic threat and the goal to avoid it. According to their theory of stigma etiology, the initial perception of threat is intensified through perceptual distortions that exaggerate group differences and are socially consolidated through the consensual sharing of perceptions.

Beukeboom and Burgers (2019) emphasise the important role of language in sharing and maintaining category representations and the consensualisation of stereotypes. They stated that the linguistic forms of labels used to denote categories influence the way those categories are perceived as being more or less coherent, meaningful, and unified (entitativity) or being more or less biological in nature (essentialism). According to them, while adjectives refer to one of the many characteristics of an individual or category and can vary in degree, nouns refer to categories, have an either-or quality,

and serve to activate the stereotype content associated with the labeled category while also blocking alternative classifications.

Very few studies addressing single and never-married people focused on the formation of stereotypes and the etiology of stigma or used linguistic and historical perspectives. Even fewer studies used comparative approaches to stress the differences between various languages with regard to the labels used for these individuals as well as the specific cultural features those labels may reflect. This area of research has undoubtedly a lot of room for development, especially when considering non-Western and non-English speaking societies.

Romanian terms for never-married people

The Romanian language has two uncommon features regarding the words that designate people who did not marry in their due time. It presents a relative symmetry in disparaging terms for both genders and also a quantitative discrepancy between genders, with more nouns for never-married men than for never-married women (Zafiu 2015).

In older, mostly Latin-originated expressions the nouns *flăcău*, *fecior* or *june* meaning 'boy'/'lad'/'young man' and *fată* meaning 'girl'/'maid(en)'/ 'young woman' are paired with adjectives like *bătrân/~ă*³ (old), *tomnatic/~ă* (autumnal), *rămas/~ă* (leftover), *trecut/~ă* (outdated), or *stătut/~ă* (stale) which all add pejorative connotations to both genders. That is to say that in Romanian we find both 'old maid' and 'old lad', 'leftover girl' and 'leftover boy', and so on. These terms were in use in the folk language during the first half of the 20th century (ALR I/II, maps 275&276). Marian (1890) showed that, in the rural world, individuals labeled in this way were targets of jokes and public mockery. They were sung to and about during collective gatherings and dancing celebrations.

Flăcău bătrân (old lad) is still used today, mostly in literary works, while *fată bătrână* (old maid) is commonly used in everyday language when intending to convey a disparaging tone or the idea of an unwanted fate. During post-communist privatisation, and even more recently, the term *fată bătrână* was used in reference to state companies that did not find buyers⁴, thus indirectly reinforcing the stereotype of the leftover woman.

In 19th-century Bucharest, a woman without a husband was referred to as '*fe-meie fără căpătâi*'⁵ or 'acephalous woman', a phrase that conveyed the lack of male

³ *Bătrân* is the masculine form, *bătrână* is the feminine one, and so is the case for the other adjectives.

⁴ As in the press headlines *SNM, the old maid of shipbuilding industry* (Martinescu 2006) or *Constanța Casino, the 'old maid' seduced and abandoned* (Bălan 2012), or *Neptun-Olimp, the old maid of the stock exchange* (Martinescu 2019).

⁵ The verb corresponding to the noun *căpătâi* – *a căpătui* – means to make a pile, to marry, to settle (down).

guardianship⁶, occupation or ‘meaning of life’, such a woman being forced to register as a ‘public woman’ or prostitute (Dărămuș 2015). The expression *‘fără câpătâi’* was also used for vagrant and unemployed individuals, who were seen as purposeless, but also dangerous individuals. Today, the term is used by media when reporting acts of vagrancy, vandalism or theft.⁷

Another term formerly used for both men and women who did not marry was *fătălău* (ALR I/II, maps 275&276). In a book published in 1930, the author used this noun with reference to unmarried, childless, female teachers ‘with an aversion to motherhood’ who, together with their pupils, ‘were a social plague, a national scourge, a permanent and modern disease’ (F.T., p. 137). Modern dictionaries give only two meanings to it: 1) ‘hermaphrodite’; 2) ‘male individual with feminine-like features and behavior, who prefers the company of women’ (Dexonline). Currently, the term is mostly used for men, with a connotation similar to ‘sissy’.

The Romanian language has three nouns equivalent to ‘bachelor’ - *burlac*, *holtei* and *becher-*, used in both folk and literary language. They were all imported from languages that, at different points in history, had had a great influence on the Romanian language.

Burlac comes from the Russian *burlak* and has the largest lexical family⁸ suggesting its usage over a long time. In Russian, *burlak* was used between the 16th and early 20th century to designate a seasonal worker responsible for towing rope-bound vessels on the banks of the Volga river. Most *burlaks* were serfs or urban dwellers, aged between 20 and 40 years, married or unmarried (Kahan 1985), who worked during summers in an often vain attempt to escape poverty (Propp 1993). An older Romanian dictionary also mentions the term’s connotation of *haimana* meaning ‘loafer’ (Scriban 1939). The recent usage of *burlac* in the media as well as in reality television series, such as the Romanian version of ‘The Bachelor’, has contributed to its semantic amelioration since it has taken on the connotation of a young and desirable individual.

The term *holtei* appeared in 18th-century, and earlier, Romanian documents (Zafiu 2015), and it also has a fairly rich lexical family⁹. Most dictionaries give a Russian or Ukrainian origin (Dexonline). However, an older dictionary offers a different etymological root in the Polish word *hultaj* which is understood as ‘vagrant’ (Scriban 1939).

⁶ In 1864, the adoption of the Civil Code, which was inspired by the 1804 Napoleonic Code, brought women in a state of total legal incapacity, without political and almost no property rights.

⁷ It was also recently used in a title of a polemical article – *These Headless People Who Govern Us* – about government officials ‘without a professional career in the true sense of the word, but skillful social climbers’ (Mitoceanu 2020).

⁸ That includes the nouns *burlăcie* (bachelorhood), *burlacă* (bachelor woman) and *burlăciță* (bachelorette), the adjectives *burlăcesc* and *burlăcescă* (bachelorly), the adverb *burlăcește*, and the verb *a burlăci* meaning ‘to bach’ (Dexonline).

⁹ It includes *holteiaș* (little bachelor), *holteie* (bachelorhood), *holteiesc* (bachelorly), *a holtei* (to bach).

In the Polish Middle Ages, *hultaj* initially designated a mercenary or an individual who worked on a temporary basis (Moraczewski 1851). However, the term acquired strong negative connotations and started to designate a category of individuals that created social problems and for the control of which drastic administrative measures had to be taken (Gloger 1901). *Holtei* is still used today, although less frequently than *burlac*.

Becher, a term now rarely used in the Romanian language, comes from the Turkish *bekâr*¹⁰. According to an old Romanian Encyclopedia, during the Ottoman Empire, there were ‘gangs of homeless people [...] who stole, robbed and acted as mercenaries’ and who were called *becheri* (Diaconovich 1898, p. 434)¹¹. Contemporary Romanian dictionaries, apart from the meaning of never-married man, also include a figurative meaning equivalent to ‘scoundrel’ (*ticălos*). During the Ottoman Empire *bekâr* was a man, married or not, who came to the city looking for work. As single migrants and, sometimes, instigators to social unrest and protests, these men were considered a threat to moral and social norms, confined to special places of residence (*bekâr odalari*) and subjected to strict control by the cities’ authorities (Castagneto & D’Amora 2006; Karpát 2002).

The terms discussed above have been used in folk language and literary works. When the adjective *bătrân* (old) is added to them, they take on a negative connotation. However, in censuses and administrative forms, since the 19th century when systematic population surveys started to be carried out in Romanian Principalities, another term has been used to designate the status of having never been married – the adjective *necăsătorit* (m.)/*necăsătorită* (f.)¹². It is applied to all individuals, including minors, and it has a neutral connotation. In literature, social science papers and demographic reports, the French-origin noun *celibatar* (m.)/*celibatară* (f.) is largely used as an equivalent to *necăsătorit*(ă). It also has a rather neutral connotation. All too often, the demographic analyses and media reports on *celibatari* do not differentiate between never-married adults and children, thus contributing to a statistical invisibility of the latter (Savu 2019). The term also perpetuates, quite subtly, the stereotype of the never-married individual as an incomplete adult. It evokes a cohesiveness and unity between never-married adults and children that cannot be found between never-married individuals and adults with other marital statuses, such as divorced or widowed. In everyday language, the term *celibatar* is sometimes used as an equivalent to ‘single’ or ‘unmarried’, for want of a better word, but not at all at the extent of today’s French term *célibataire*.

¹⁰ The word is currently used in Turkish to designate a single person, man or woman, not currently married or living apart from one’s spouse (Castagneto & D’Amora 2006).

¹¹ Variants of *bekâr* are found in many Balkan languages and former territories under Ottoman rule. In Hungarian, *betyár* stands for a highwayman from the 19th century (Britannica).

¹² *Necăsătorit*/~ă has two equivalents in English: *unmarried*, in a ‘word-for-word’ translation, and *never married*, in a ‘sense-for-sense’ translation.

Words and the Romanian socio-demographic context

Although some of the terms and connotations discussed in the previous paragraphs are now obsolete, their abundance and once widespread usage suggest that single, unmarried individuals were not uncommon occurrences in Romania. At the end of the 19th century, Marian (1890) reckoned that there were 'lots' of men and women who did not marry in due time. The historical demographic data on the marital status of Romanians is very scarce, though. It is known, however, that until the beginning of the 20th century Romania was part of a very small group of European countries¹³ where the male population exceeded the female one (Colescu 1944)¹⁴. The 1899 and 1912 Romanian Censuses¹⁵ showed that before the First World War there were more never-married men than women¹⁶ (Trebici & Ghinoiu 1986) and many of the unattached men were of foreign origin (Colescu 1944).

As shown in the previous paragraphs, the etymologies of the terms *burlac*, *holtei* and *becher* refer to rather poor, uprooted, marginalised or even delinquent individuals. Based on historical data and linguistic arguments (Cihac 1879; Zafiu 2015), it can be stated that these terms entered the Romanian vocabulary long before the 19th century, supposedly through the contact of alien single individuals with local Romanian-speaking communities. Arguably, the wifeless men of the past were mostly outlanders, individuals that nobody could vouch for, and who were perceived as a threat to local communities and, later on, to the nation. The greater number of terms for men than for women, as well as the noun form of the former, suggest that the bachelors may have caused greater cultural concern and that they may have been perceived as a more meaningful and coherent category than that of the old maids. The latter might have been, and may still be, closer to a 'loose set of individuals' (Beukeboom & Burgers 2019, p. 9) than to a unified category.

In the late 19th century and early 20th century, especially during the interwar years, the ideals of the family as the cradle of the nation and the woman as the mother of the nation were strongly promoted within nationalist discourses. The individuals who delayed or eluded marriage were depicted as being dangerous and harmful to the

¹³ That included Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece, and Luxemburg (Colescu 1944).

¹⁴ The surplus of men can be partially attributed to previous wars when foreign armies crossed and stationed on Romanian territories, but also to a predominantly male immigration consisting of political and war refugees, settlers, merchants and traders, industrialists and workers (Colescu 1944; Ardeleanu 2017).

¹⁵ Before the 'Great Union' of Romania with Transylvania, the Romanian censuses and surveys covered a much smaller territory and population, that of 'Little Romania'.

¹⁶ This gender ratio was reversed during the communist regime (Trebici & Ghinoiu 1986), but after the fall of communism it shifted back to a situation where there are more never-married men than never-married women for all age groups up to 70 years (INSA).

future of the country (Savu 2019). The communist period, especially after Ceausescu came into power, represented an era of utmost control over citizens' private lives. The single and never-married individuals were absent from the public discourse on the 'New Man' and lost in the collective plans and pro-natalist policies (Savu 2019). The combination of traditionalist values and state policies kept the number of single and never-married individuals at a very low level for many decades.

The current statistics on never-married Romanians show quite a different picture than at any other time before the new millennium. During almost the entire 20th century, there was very little variation in the average age at first marriage and the percentages of never-married men and women. Between 1899 and 1992, the age at first marriage rose only by 0.7 years for men and 1.8 years for women, and the percentage of never-married people in the 45 to 49 age group¹⁷ stayed below 5% for both genders¹⁸ (Trebici & Ghinoiu 1986; INSa). The fall of communism marked the beginning of significant changes on all levels of society, including demographic behaviours. Between 1992 and 2011, the percentage of never-married people in the 45-49 age group rose from 5.2% to 14.8% for men and from 3.4% to 8.2% for women (INSCa). Between 1992 and 2018, the average age at first marriage rose by 6.7 years for men and 6.6 years for women (INSB)¹⁹. On the European continent, however, Romania remains a country with low ages at first marriage, very high marriage rates, high marriage stability, low divorce rates and low percentages of people who never marry at all (Popescu 2008; Rotariu, Dumănescu & Hărăguș 2017).

The demographic behaviors are shaped by cultural and social values. According to international surveys, Romania is highly familistic, traditionalist, marriage-oriented, and one of the most religious in Europe (Voicu M. 2008; Popescu 2008). In Romania, the Orthodox religion²⁰ is seen as essential for the existence of the nation (Voicu M. 2008). Similarly, the family is considered an important institution in preserving traditions and national values and 'the aspect of life that offers the highest satisfaction to individuals' (Popescu 2008, p. 191). The marriage arrangement is favoured, especially for giving birth and raising children, while cohabitation, which is less frequent than in other European countries, is mostly seen as a premarital stage (Rotariu, Dumănescu & Hărăguș 2017).

¹⁷ An age group used by Hajnal (1965) as an indicator of the number of people who never marry at all.

¹⁸ In the 1992 Census the percentage of never-married men was 5.2%, up from 2.5% in the previous Census held in 1977.

¹⁹ That is, from 25.2 to 31.9 years for men, and from 22.1 to 28.7 years for women (INSB).

²⁰ More than eighty percent of Romanian residents are Orthodox believers (INSa).

In Romania, while not being married remains a discreditable attribute (Goffman 1963), not having a child has always been considered an almost social offense²¹, especially in the case of women. Bucur and Miroiu (2018, p. 63) found that 'across generational, educational, religious, and ethnic lines, bearing a child and becoming a parent are core components of Romanian women's identities'. It is generally thought that having a child outside marriage is better than not having any (Pantea 2013), and that a female individual does not really become a woman if she does not experience motherhood (Voicu 2015). While single mothers are more or less accepted (Popescu 2008), the never-married childless women are considered incomplete and generate suspicion. The nationalist discourses that focused on the coupling of motherhood and nation during the 19th and 20th centuries have lost momentum, but the 'traditional' values are still very salient and the stigma of being childless is internalised by many women who did not comply with the 'biosocial program' The new postmodernist values, which construct motherhood as 'subjective intentional' (Vlăsceanu cited in Voicu 2015) have added a new layer to said stigma.

The quasi-general consensus on the value of marriage and family is also reflected in the way Romanian scholars choose their topics of research and collect and interpret the data. The current changes in the demographic and social behaviors of Romanians are studied exclusively from the perspective of marriage as a social and psychological norm(ality), while the state of never being married, *celibatul*²², is still mostly defined in terms of deficit and pathology by Romanian social scientists. The latter rarely allocate more than a couple of pages to this 'alternative to marriage' and most of the references, seemingly always the same, are drawn from the studies published in the '80s by American scholars²³.

A quick cultural-comparative glance

Mills (2000) argued that a historical perspective, otherwise necessary when studying any social issues, inevitably leads to a comparative study of several societies. According to him, only through such a comparison can a scholar understand the contemporary

²¹ For three decades before 1997, Romanian men and women over 25 years without children had paid a 'childlessness' tax.

²² That is, *celibacy*, without religious and abstinence-related connotations, or rather *never-marriedness*.

²³ As in, for example, the two-page chapter 'Celibatul' from Apostu's book *Marriage Between Stability and Dissolution* (2013), where *celibatul* was described as 'a form of solitary living' that 'generates a great economic capacity, as well as more sexual advantages, but it has great deficiencies in terms of solidarity, socialization, and especially reproduction' (p. 194).

shape of a society and what is absent from it. When compared with other languages which have been enriched with new terms and metaphorical expressions over the years (Savu 2018), the Romanian lexicon related to never-married people did not evolve much, or at all, since the late 19th century. Apart from some words and expressions becoming outdated, there are almost no lexical changes or additions. This can be seen as both a cause and a consequence of the socio-demographic and discursive realities.

For example, the Romanian term *fată bătrână*, although still used in media and everyday conversations to make derogatory statements about never-married women, it has never been used in public discourses as much as its English and German equivalents. Romanians do not have a card game called ‘Fată Bătrână’, like the Victorian ‘Old Maid’ or the German ‘Alte Jungfer’, and they have a less weighty historical and media-fueled imagery of old maids than the English, Americans or Germans. This can be accounted for by the fact that, for most of the 19th and 20th centuries, England and Germany had a ‘surplus of women’ that generated important public debates (Dreher 1993; Dollard 2009), while Romania, until World War I, had more men than women (Colescu 1944).

Romanians do have old terms for never-married men and women that suggest redundancy and devaluation, but there is no current campaign, carried on by the media and sanctioned by state institutions or scholars, against never-married people, as it happened in China and Japan (Hua, 2015; Yamaguchi, 2006; Nicolae, 2014). Romanian scholars did not reactivate century-old terms²⁴, nor did they coin new ones²⁵ to publicly shame people who did not marry. The latter are mostly ignored by local scholars. However, Romania does not have China’s huge gender imbalance, nor are marriage and fertility so strongly linked together in Romania as they are in Japan²⁶. The general anxieties of Romanian society are currently related mostly to the huge loss of population over the last three decades due to emigration²⁷.

On the other hand, in Romania, there are hardly any empowering messages or positive representations of never-married people, as is the case in other societies, especially Western ones. While men have always had more leeway in regards to their marital status, women remain bound to the role of mother, even more than to that of wife. Drawing on Schneider’s (2004) arguments about stereotype consensus, it is

²⁴ *Guang gun* (bare sticks) in Chinese, *onibaba* (demon hag) in Japanese.

²⁵ *Sheng nu* (leftover woman) in Chinese, *makeinu* (loser dog), *parasaito shinguru* (parasite single) in Japanese.

²⁶ In Japan, out-of-marriage births account for 2.3% of total births, while in Romania they account for 31,3% (OECD).

²⁷ The number of permanent and temporary Romanian emigrants who left the country after 1990 is estimated to be between 3 and 5 million, the highest increase in the migration stock among the EU countries (Dospinescu and Russo, 2018). The Romanian media talks about ‘the exodus of the Romanians’ (Digi24, 2018).

stated here that after the fall of communism the stereotypes of never-married people in Romania have persisted not so much due to the pressures of social conformity, but because they have gone unchallenged and have preserved consensus mainly by keeping the appearance of it.

Conclusion

Although in recent years the stereotypes and stigmatisation of various categories of singles have been the focus of research for more than a few scholars, the issues of stereotype formation and the etiology of stigma related to these categories have not been addressed to the same degree. Never-married people, especially women, are stereotyped and stigmatised in many societies, but there are rather significant differences in the way these negative stereotypes and stigma were constructed and how they evolved over time within local cultures.

Beginning with the ideas that the present is built on history and that language mirrors social reality and culture, this paper proposes a multiperspective approach to the study of stereotypes and stigma related to never-married people. It argues that by delving into the past, in terms of language and socio-demographic data, the current beliefs and attitudes towards this category of individuals can be better understood and explained. This type of endeavor can offer valuable information complementing more empirical and present-oriented approaches that have so far prevailed in the study of stereotypes and stigmas.

This paper has explored the links between the Romanian words and expressions referring to never-married people and the local socio-demographic context from a historical perspective. It has investigated the etymological roots and linguistic forms of the terms used for never-married people, showing that the Romanian language presents a relative symmetry of disparaging terms for both genders, but also a quantitative discrepancy between the available nouns for never-married men and those for never-married women. This latter aspect, apart from being a by-product of previous cultural and linguistic contacts, can also reflect a greater cultural concern regarding this category. Originally, all three imported nouns designating never-married men referred to rather destitute, marginalised or delinquent individuals. Romanian historical demography shows that many single men of the past were also of foreign origin. All these suggest an initial perception of threat, real or symbolic, on which the stigma of wifeless men was built.

In the case of Romanian women, it is argued here that not having a child has been more stigmatised than not having a marital partner, and that the stigma of childlessness was maintained through nationalist and familist discourses and pro-natalist policies.

The lack of specific nouns, similar to *spinster*, can be explained by a lesser cultural concern with never-married women, given the fact that Romania, unlike England or Germany, has never had, nor was perceived as having, an alarm-inducing surplus of women of marriageable age.

The initial perception of the threat linked to single and never-married individuals has faded out, the past centuries' nationalist discourses have lost their power, and the pro-familist and pro-natalist policies have become less potent. However, the stereotype consensus has long been achieved. The negative stereotypes and stigma related to never-married people and childless women have never been challenged. They still linger in the collective mind of Romanians and they manifest themselves in more subtle ways than in other societies. The category of never-married people is mostly ignored by Romanian scholars and public opinion, and when it is remembered or noticed, it is usually depicted in terms of deficit or need. Even though there is no empirical evidence showing the current degree of consensus on the idea that those who did not marry 'had lived for nothing in this world', it can be argued that this 19th-century assertion still has a bearing on current social perceptions and interactions.

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