A Table for One
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Over the years that I have researched Israeli internet portals, I have detected a repetitive, periodical movement. As holidays like Rosh Hashana (Jewish New Year’s Eve) and Passover, or widely commemorated romantic celebrations like Valentine’s Day approach, Israeli websites begin to publish a range of columns, written by and about single women, discussing their fears of being—and appearing to be—on their own over the holidays. This phenomenon is not unique to Israeli society, of course. One can easily find any number of similar posts on American or British websites and portals, recounting the loneliness of the single woman during the holiday season, or routine social embarrassments such as dining alone in a restaurant or going out alone to a bar.

Many dating and relationship experts publish tips advising readers how to cope with the holiday period: facing one’s immediate family with confidence for instance, what I would describe as *keeping up appearances* as a single person. Some columns advise their habitués how not to fall prey to the self-pity and angst that can accompany spending Christmas or New Year’s Eve alone, while other writers suggest witty responses to impertinent questions from family members like “When are you going to settle down and give me some grandchildren?”

The pressure is both explicit and implicit, verbal and non-verbal. Single women above a certain age report the surprised or pitiful gazes directed at them during family gatherings, and often complain that they are constantly forced to account for their enduring single status. My analysis of web columns over the last eight years shows that appearing alone in public in couple- and family-oriented societies leads one to heightened reflexivity and, when possible, serves as an impetus towards the careful management of one’s social appearance. At particular times and in particular settings, single women are made particularly aware of their required performance, and of the temporal norms that impede their appearance in public.

This chapter reflects upon this dynamic from an analytical perspective, one which takes into account the temporal interactional elements of being and appearing alone not merely within familial settings but also in other public settings like bars, café, New Year’s Eve celebrations, and work-related functions. As I will show, single women are
particularly aware of both the temporal rules and of the ensuing assumptions that these rules thrust into their everyday lives. I argue that the temporal elements of social situations such as New Year’s Eve, Valentine’s Day, the weekend and going out for dinner have a significant impact on the visibility of single women, and affect their ability to orient and assert control of their agency in public settings.

In general, my exploration of this dynamic will tend to a Goffmanian analysis, in particular drawing from his conceptualizations about the interactional order in public settings. Such an approach offers a means through which we can understand how perceptions of social time produce both the societal freedoms and societal restraints that guide—and restrain—the presentation of the self in public. The presentation of the female single self in public is, as I shall demonstrate, very much dependent on the conventions of social time. In this sense, this chapter also aims to make a significant contribution to symbolic interactionist literature, by exploring the temporal elements of the interaction order.

Beyond this, the situational and interactional analysis presented in this chapter emphasizes the links between temporality, relationship status, and one’s interactional unit. My understanding of temporality rests upon an examination of interactional dimensions, and vice versa. The sociological understanding—widely accepted—that during everyday interactions social actors attempt to control the information others have about them should be re-evaluated, I argue, by taking into consideration the temporal components of these interactions.

My analysis shows that at certain times of the day, the week, the month, and the year, familial and heteronormative codes are particularly reinforced. This is one reason why many single women report an increased intensity in the regulatory gaze towards them at these times. By implication, these are times when single women become particularly self-reflective and aware of temporal social protocols.

This chapter will explore the temporal regularities of everyday life from a different perspective. It will take into account the temporal interactional elements of being and appearing alone at particular times (such as night and day, the week, and the weekend). Thus I argue that the temporal elements of social situations, such as New Year’s Eve or dining alone, have an important bearing on single women’s impression management.

“The holidays are difficult for singles”

In 2010 the Israeli Channel 2 news reported that some Chinese single men and women had found an original and expensive solution to cope with their parents’ criticism: rent a date for the Chinese New Year’s eve (Channel 2 News 2010). Following this story I discovered that two years later the China Daily published that Taobao.com—a major e-commerce website in China—offered a “rent a date” service, providing a companion for single people to take to their parents’ homes on Chinese New Year’s Eve (China Daily 2012). Covered by news agencies around the world, the story’s main emphasis was the fact that the service was in demand. In an interview with the Guardian’s Beijing correspondent, a twenty-six-year-old single woman explained:
I was not looking for some perfect guy to marry. Just someone tall—my parents like tall guys a lot—honest and not too talkative, so he doesn’t say something wrong ... My parents want me to get married by 30 ... Bringing a “boyfriend” back home simply means I get less hassle from relatives and my parents will stop worrying about my romantic life. (Branigan 2012)

From a Goffmanian perspective, the fake boyfriend plan can be interpreted as a strategy for interaction, which enables single people both to avoid familial criticism and to save face (Goffman 1967). The interviewee understood that New Year’s Eve always created a precarious experience, and made her decision “in the light [of] one's thoughts about the others’ thoughts about oneself” (Goffman 1969, 101). In this respect, she can be viewed as a strategic actor aspiring to exercise control over the impression management they convey to others. Hiring a boyfriend enables her to create the right kind of image for her audience—in this case her parents. Being single demands a carefully planned performance.

The wide reportage of this new commodity strikes a chord. Amongst other things, it reinforces another claim made by Goffman, that for single people some interactions are precarious events, during which they struggle to save face and maintain their dignity. I have yet to find such initiatives as the Chinese rent-a-date service in Israel, yet one can find similar websites, like Dates4Hire in the USA, offering companionship services and escorts for a range of social events including weddings, proms or work and family related functions.

On their website, they state:

Dates4Hire was created with one purpose in mind and that is to provide people the ability to hire a platonic date on demand. Living in a fast paced world and dedicating most of your time to your job and career doesn’t always leave you very much time to pursue a romantic relationship.

Nevertheless, just because you’re single doesn’t mean you should have to attend social and family functions on your own. Hiring a date from our site is not only as easy as clicking a mouse, but also gives you the ability to choose someone that is compatible to your event. The other major benefit of hiring a date is that they are there to provide a service to you and make sure that your night is a success no matter what the situation. (Dates4Hire 2014)

Both services exemplify the Goffmanian principle that our interactions require performance, in this case a boyfriend or a date for hire is the desired prop. It is no longer a problem if one is single, as Dates4Hire stress that they can provide the necessary props and ensure a successful performance. This theme is reinforced in many of the columns written by single Israeli women. In a column published the day before Valentine’s Day, “For Those in Love, Every Day is a Day of Love—But What About Me?,” Lalli Blue (a pseudonym), a single woman, describes the experience thus:

A few times a year, let’s say New Year’s Eve, Valentine’s Day, your ex-boyfriend’s birthday and your younger cousin’s wedding—she is at least one year younger than you—you, as a typical single woman, have to go through the ultimate singlehood test. (Blue 2007)
The holidays, according to the writer, are “the ultimate test” for single women. The derivative question is, why does she refer to this as a test and—more importantly—what is at stake? In other words: why and how is she tested? Why do these special days and rituals pose particular challenges for single women? What is the essence, and the purpose of the test?

As noted above, as the holiday seasons approach, various experts proffer advice about coping with the stress and depression that is part and parcel of the season. Odeta, a well-known Israeli columnist, elucidates: “The holidays are a special period when the single population are most aware of their single status, as they don’t have a partner to take home [to their family]” (Odeta 2004). A different column, by Adi Kimchi, a dating advisor writing for Ynet, bears the title: “Passover and You Are Alone. How to Cope with Your Family?” The column’s opening paragraph runs thus:

Why, on an evening which is supposed to be harmonious and familial, do you get the feeling you are being criticized more harshly than ever, the fact that one is alone multiplies itself, and a feeling that you are being judged continues throughout the dinner like horseradish burning your nostrils? This is a column about the Jewish genome, with five tips on how to cope with this situation. (Kimchi 2014)

Yael Doron and Gili Bar, also relationship advisors and columnists with Ynet, appropriate a client’s thoughts about Valentine’s Day:

It’s Valentine’s Day, and once again the only telephone call I will get will be from my mother asking me the same question: “Well, what’s going on? Is there anything new?” I’m so depressed … All the guys whom I’ve met so far have either broken my heart or only wanted sex. Actually, when I think about it, I’m better off on my own. Could it be that I don’t have this couplehood gene? Perhaps people like me aren’t supposed to be in relationships? Perhaps I’ll have a child on my own. (Doron and Bar 2007)

In the extracts above, the holiday season and Valentine’s Day prompt acute self-awareness. Elizabeth Sharp and Lawrence Ganong (2011), who interviewed single American women about their experiences of singlehood, describe these occurrences as encountering triggers. The women whom they interviewed perceived couple-oriented holidays like New Year’s Eve and Valentine’s Day, and family-oriented holidays like Thanksgiving and Christmas, as the triggers that reminded them of their single status.

The point I wish to emphasize is that one’s self-awareness is connected to one’s temporal awareness, and to the particular cultural scripts dictated by conventions of social time. As Eviatar Zerubavel (1981) clarifies, the temporal regularities of our everyday lives are among the major background expectancies that shape the basis of the “normalcy” of our social environment. Taking this into consideration, the holiday seasons are often perceived as times when heteronormative familial ideologies take center stage. These ideologies promote the family values that emphasize the primacy of the familial unit, familial togetherness, and family bonding. These are the times that not only is family done (Morgan 1996) but also has to be displayed (Finch 2007).
A time for display

In recent years, sociologists like David Morgan (1996, 2011) and Janet Finch (2007) have created new analytical tools for the understanding of the lived experience of family life—tools that stress that the family is a constructed quality of human interaction, defined through its activities. Finch argues that displaying families is “the processes by which individuals and groups of individuals, convey to each other and to relevant audiences that certain of their actions do constitute ‘doing family things’ and thereby confirm that these relationships are ‘family’ relationships” (Finch 2007, 67). To this, she adds that an important message conveyed to external audiences is that “This is my family, and it works.” My contention in this context is that temporal regularities and their background expectancies are a significant component of this message.

Hence, when considering the extracts above together with Finch’s and Morgan’s observations, I argue that time plays a crucial factor for both doing and displaying families. The holidays, which often include family meals with extended family members, contain many ritualized aspects which are intensified by a scrutinizing gaze directed towards those who do not conform with its normative structures and temporal rhythms.

Single women do not do family, and neither can they put one on display. In his evaluation of Finch’s theory, Heaphy (2011) claims that displaying families cannot be disentangled from the normative ideals of a white, middle-class, nuclear family. What counts as a good and convincing display depends on one’s subscription to familial norms. The single woman’s presence reveals these normative elements, placing emphasis on the normative parameters that underpin what would be considered as a successful display. In these settings, the single woman stands as an uneven number, herein defying the social protocols of the normative and required components of family time and family togetherness.

In a similar way, Valentine’s Day and New Year’s Eve parties can be considered as times during which coupledom is done and displayed. In a culture in which, as Shelly Budgeon (2008) points out, heterosexual couples occupy a privileged position, events ranging from family meals during holidays to Valentine’s Day, are times where this position is recognized and receives its social symbolic reward.

From this viewpoint, for some single women these are the periods when the fact that they lack the required and privileged coupled status is accentuated. It is noteworthy that the increasing commodification of the holiday seasons in public culture contributes in many ways to the increasing visibility of couplehood and family life.

Yael Doron, a dating advisor, tells the story of a thirty-five-year-old single woman, which reveals the difficulties inherent in spending the holiday season with her family:

I’m fed up. Everybody thinks that I should help, from early in the morning, with preparations for the festive meal. The reason is that all my siblings arrive with their life partners or children. I’m fed up that everybody assumes that I should wash the dishes and tidy up afterwards. The reason for this dynamic is that everybody assumes that I am not in a rush to go anywhere. I’m fed up with being blessed and prayed over again and again [to
get married] ... I’m fed up of being thirty five years old and feeling old and desperate.
I’m just fed up! (Doron 2010)

The holiday season is depicted here as a time of crisis. This account manifests a
division of labor, organized according to one’s relationship status. In family encounters,
coupled family members enjoy certain privileges. As the above quoted single woman
points out, the unjust allocation of domestic chores is linked to her status as a single
woman, unable to enjoy the privileges granted to her brothers and sisters.

Ann Byrne (2003) describes a similar paradigm, as experienced by single women
living in Ireland. Some of the single women interviewed by Byrne reported that around
their families of origin, they felt like second-class citizens, invisible and less important
than their siblings (ibid., 454).

The account quoted above emphasizes that Israeli single women are not only denied
the privileges granted to their married siblings, but have their time devalued too. In
the accounts above, single women’s time is considered as less valuable, thanks to the
presumption that due to their single status, they have “no life of their own.” One might
assume that this unjust division of work is also related to different gender-based expec-
tations; even so, her single status is the prism which she lays emphasis upon, and which
coheres with similar accounts from single women.

The advisor describes this single woman as:

Sitting on the sofa and crying. She is so beautiful and successful. She has a car, owns her
own apartment, has a good job and has a promising future yet she is so miserable and
desperate. The holidays are always difficult but from one year to another it seems that
her capacity to cope with the holiday season decreases. For her coping with the holiday
period becomes harder and harder. (Doron 2010)

I propose that one’s self-perception—the experiencing of increasing social visibility
and invisibility alongside the devaluation that accompanies this—cannot be under-
stood without paying attention to the social meanings of time. Another point at issue
here is the importance of time units, and the way that we, as social actors, differentiate
between them. Such an analysis leads us to Emile Durkheim (2008) and his considera-
tion of the separation between religious and profane life. As Durkheim argues:

The religious and the profane life cannot coexist in the same unit of time. It is necessary
to assign determined days or periods to the first from which all profane occupations are
excluded. Thus feast days are born. There is no religion, and consequently, no society
which has not known and practised this division of time into two distinct parts, alternat-
ing with one another according to a law varying with the peoples and civilizations; as we
have already pointed out, it was probably the necessity of this alteration which led men
to introduce into the continuity and homogeneity of duration, certain distinctions and
differentiations which it does not naturally have. (ibid., 308)

Durkheim’s distinction between profane and sacred time is of real significance when
one attempts to understand how the unaccompanied presence of single women is
interpreted in public life. The division of time, to varied time units distinguishing
between the everyday and the sacred, is embedded in temporal protocols and temporal
norms. When considering these forms of separation, it is also important to acknowledge what Goffman perceives as the basic units of public life, the *single* and the *with* (Goffman 2010). These interactional units, as I will now argue, play a crucial role in single women’s ability to plan and master their social performance.

**The temporality of participation units**

Goffman adds another important layer to the analysis of social time and singlehood. According to Goffman, our routine participation in public life is conducted through the distinction between what he grasps as fundamental units of public life: the *single* and the *with*.

Individuals navigate streets and shops and attend social occasions ... either in a “single” or in a “with.” These are interactional units, not social-structural ones. They pertain entirely to the management of co-presence. I take them to be fundamental units of public life.

A single is a party of one, a person who has come alone, a person by “himself,” even though there may be other individuals near him ... A with is a party of more than one whose members are perceived to be “together” (Goffman 2010, 19)

The different accounts analyzed above show that the temporal dimension of participation units impact upon one’s social interaction. The demarcation of time into ordinary and extraordinary time has much bearing on the visibility of the participation units to which single women belong, at different times and in different social settings.

Throughout the texts, single women reveal their hesitations about the obstacles attendant to being alone in public. Commonly, they are perceived as alone even when there are other individuals, like family members, friends or acquaintances, near them. This dynamic demonstrates the somewhat automatic identification between the category of singlehood and that of being on one’s own.

Kinneret Tal-Meir, a dating advisor writing on the *Ynet* portal, describes her encounter with Sharon a few days before *Rosh Hashanah* (The Jewish New Year’s Eve):

My first meeting this morning was with Sharon, just a few days before Rosh Hashanah ... Sharon is a 36-year-old single woman who is terrified of the holidays. Her younger brother is married and expecting a child; her younger sister, about to finish high school, has a boyfriend. She is the only one alone. In the present situation, as she explained, she has no choice but to be lonely and miserable throughout the holidays. Her married friends will be estranged to her, and she will be obliged to watch her happy siblings in her parents’ house and feel that she is the least fortunate. (Tal-Meir 2013)

She comments further about the effects of the holiday season on the single population:

During the holidays, the difficulties of being single are intensified. Everybody arranges themselves in couple and family units, and only you are by yourself. The pitiful glances will reach their peak on Rosh Hashanah itself. Even the aunt that got married late [but not *that* late] will give you that look that will make you feel uncomfortable. Your parents
will do their best to avoid looking at you, yet your mother will talk with your aunts and look at you with sadness in her eyes. Eventually, she won’t be able to hold herself back, and she’ll ask “Well, you still haven’t found someone good enough for you? What’s going on with you?” And as a result, you won’t know where to bury yourself, whether you want to be in a relationship or not. The New Year holiday season can really be a burden. What should you do? (ibid.)

Another example of this dynamic is the matter of attending New Year’s Eve parties as a single woman. Thelma and Louise (the pseudonym of two single women columnists writing for Ynet) write about this matter:

The leaves are falling, the temperature is dropping … the typical single woman takes a break from her existential reflections and invests most of her efforts in thinking and preparing towards one evening. (Thelma and Louise 2006b)

In another column, dating advisor Adi Kimchi quotes the experiences of one of her single female clients:

Tonight, everyone will celebrate the end of 2013 and the beginning of the New Year. On these occasions, I always get the feeling that everyone is doing something exciting. It’s crowded everywhere, everyone is going out, everyone is partying. You can hear laughter from inside the houses, and the kiss at midnight, oh this kiss, creating an illusion about what the next year will look like … This can be an extremely difficult, even depressing time for those who are on their own. For single women and men, this night is a reminder that they are on their own. That, again it didn’t happen. Love has not arrived.

Then just one moment before you begin to go through your telephone book or check the invitations you have received through Facebook … How about going out on a date? Yes! A date on New Year’s Eve! Perhaps you’ll be lucky and get a kiss at midnight or even more than that: you’ll be able to tell your grandchildren that your first date took place on the cusp of 2013 and 2014. How can you do it? Continue reading. (Kimchi 2013)

In her column, mentioned above, Lalli frames this dynamic within the context of an exclusive party: “So it’s true that you like to party … but you really don’t like closed parties which you weren’t invited to. Especially those where you have no one to dance with” (Blue 2007).

Between them, the quotes above create a rich and textured description of the social interaction between single women and their environment during the holiday season. These descriptions are ubiquitous in the blogosphere, and are also present in studies about the lives of single women elsewhere (Byrne 2003; Sharp and Ganong 2011). For example, Sharp and Ganong, who interviewed single American women, perceive these encounters as affecting their experiences of displacement from their families of origin.

As various columnists note, these difficulties become even more acute during the holidays. The observation that the holidays are a difficult time for single women is commonplace, but yet I think it demands further problematization: What changes during the holidays, or on Valentine’s Day? As Lalli Blue explains, “everyone looks more coupled” (Blue 2007); the consequence is that the solitary presence of the single
woman becomes more visible. Moreover, the difficulties in escaping the familial gaze, and in being subjected to public scrutiny during the holiday season, emphasizes the fact that the single woman’s performance does not fit the ideals of a couple-oriented culture. The single woman’s solitary presence becomes hyper-visible, and turns into a matter of public concern, prompting intrusive questions.

Employing a Goffmanian perspective, we can argue that the single woman fails to appear in the adequate interactional unit, her solitary appearance disrupting the couple- or familial-based interactional order. During these sacred times so connected with familial values, single women are required to present themselves accordingly—in this case, being members of the with participation unit.

In Chapter 7, I analyzed Noa Banosh’s column (2011b), in which she opined that one reason why single women hate weddings is because they are expected to arrive with the right accessories—a boyfriend being very much obligatory. The moment of arrival is critical, as it reveals the participation unit to which the single woman belongs to. As in many social encounters, the interactional codes of participation in weddings are couple-oriented, and require—as Noa states—arrival with the correct accessories, in this case belonging to a couple interactional unit.

This is also one of the possible reasons why Noa cites attending a wedding as a single woman as “a magnifying glass that enlarges and reflects all that is wrong and flawed in her life” (Banosh 2011b). Or, as Lalli terms it, “the single woman’s ultimate test” (Blue 2007). It would seem that appearing as a party of one leads to a heightened reflexivity and social visibility.

Evenings and weekends

Next, I propose to shed light on the links between participation units and social time from a different perspective. The significance of participation units also brings to the forefront the transition from the weekdays to the weekends, and from daytime to nighttime. Shirli Farkash, a single woman and a regular commentator on the Ynet portal, writes about how and why so many single people are afraid of the weekends:

I know many men and women who become anxious as the weekend approaches. These are people who work very hard: they fight corruption, stand on a stage, they go to court and present their arguments before tough judges. But at the weekend, they fall apart. The fear of being alone for 24 hours kills them, seeps into their soul from Thursday afternoon.¹ (Farkash 2007)

In his study exploring the invention of seven-day week, Zerubavel observed that the concept of a week is “an artificial rhythm, created by human beings totally independently of any natural periodicity” (Zerubavel 1985, 4). Building on Durkheim’s observation, Zerubavel regards the week as a cycle of periodic alternations which distinguish between ordinary and extraordinary days. If there was no contrast between them, he observes, there would no rhythm to the week. Shirli—whose column is quoted above—writes about how this contrast affects the experiences of single people. The temporal perspective, she suggests, is crucial to understanding this phenomenon,
as these days are identified as the time to be spent with one’s family or life partner. In this instance, Shirli notes, “The fear of being alone for 24 hours kills them”: alternatively, we can say that a weekend alone is grasped as “time to be killed.”

The demarcation between weekdays and the weekend, and between the everyday and holidays, is illustrated, for example, in a well-known Israeli song *Shabatot Vehagim* (Weekends and Holidays). This song, by Yehudit Ravitz—one of the most popular female Israeli singers of the last three decades—reveals the longings of a single woman to be with her married lover during the holidays and on the Sabbath. The woman depicts herself as standing alone on her roof at these moments, imagining her lover with his wife and kids. The implication is clear: these are the times, without question, when one should be with one’s family.

The situational and relational aspect of these temporal dynamics and subtle boundaries is brought to the fore in a question posed in another *Ynet* column: “Dear single women and men, have you ever gone out to a bar by yourselves? I haven’t” (*The Naked Truth* 2008). This question raised by *The Naked Truth*—the pseudonym of a regular *Ynet* columnist—describes the general discomfort experienced by many single women when they want to go out by themselves. This discomfort is rarely problematized. In fact, such a discomfort is prescribed by couple-oriented prescriptions. Moreover, this temporal order achieves a high degree of orderliness and normative expectations. As Goffman elucidates, the interaction order is predicated on a large base of shared cognitive presuppositions, if not normative ones, and self-sustained restraints (Goffman 1983, 5). These normative presuppositions and self-sustained restraints are evident in many of the texts informing the manner in which our social interaction becomes a collective and performative achievement. The writer of the column answers her own question with an experience-based explanation:

> Usually, I go out [to a bar] with a male friend, with a female friend or a group of friends … I don’t have a problem sitting by myself in a café with a book, and I very much enjoy being by myself in my apartment and enjoying the silence. But there is something that intimidates me about going out to a bar by myself. I’m afraid that if I go to a bar, it will be seen as a declaration that I’m desperate—alternatively, it may seem that I have failed in persuading even one person to join me. This stands in contrast to my favorite cafés, where I can hide behind the pages of the book and pretend that my loneliness is a result and outcome of my own choice. (*The Naked Truth* 2008)

This illustration provides a vivid example of how single women become attuned to the cultural scripts dictating the spatial and temporal dimensions of the participation unit one belongs to. Going to a bar in the evening is an activity in which the required participation unit is of the *with*, while being by yourself in a café as a single woman is a valid option.

Thus, going out as a *single* at times identified as *with* time defies temporal norms and regulations. These norms clearly define—and thus to a certain extent, determine—one’s capacity for successful self-presentation and options of impression management (Goffman 1959). Appearing on one’s own at a bar conveys—as The Naked Truth states—a message of desperation, signaling that you have not succeeded in persuading
anyone to join you. Hence, the mere appearance as a single woman at the wrong time and place could be interpreted as an indication of a failed performance, putting herself at risk of losing face.

In her study on Norwegian solo travelers, Bente Heimtun (2012) distinguishes between three social identities available to them during their travels: the friend, the loner, and the independent traveler. Heimtun defines the loner position as one in which a woman travels alone and predominantly feels socially excluded, as opposed to the independent traveler position, in which one feels autonomous and empowered. In analyzing the loner position, Heimtun further notes that touristic spaces can turn out to be familial and heteronormative settings, and in that sense exclude single women and mark them out as “others.” As one of the women interviewed by Heimtun declared, “Dinner alone is the worst … you feel left out” (Heimtun 2010, 138). Another woman described the discomfort caused by being stared at while eating alone: “God, they are staring at me. Because they see that I am here alone” (Heimtun 2012, 9).

However, Heimtun stresses that the social identity of the independent traveler is about the enjoyable solo holiday, which underlines the opportunities and freedoms inherent in being single. For them, solo travel presents the opportunity to explore new territories, to meet new people, and to exercise their independence and freedom. Similar experiences can be found in a plethora of single female blogs published in recent years, in which women detail the myriad benefits of traveling and having time on their own.

Yet the Israeli accounts I have found mainly demonstrate experiences of social exclusion and increased visibility during evenings, weekends, and holydays. The writer The Naked Truth notes that even though she often goes to bars with friends, going on her own is not considered by her to be an option. Thus, the question addressed to single women “Have you ever gone to a bar by yourself?” is also related to the risk of losing control of one’s ability to manage their self-presentation in relation to others. These public encounters, whether in a bar or in a café, are temporally patterned practices for which the single woman needs to plan carefully.

According to Goffman: “When an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him or to bring into play information about him already possessed” (Goffman 1959, 2). Time plays a significant role in this kind of social encounter. The single woman has to play and plan her performance in this ritualized setting. The point I wish to emphasize here is that entering a café in the morning or the afternoon does not require such careful strategizing. Thus, as we can see, social normativity is socially produced through conventions of time. According to this interpretation, if the single woman decides to sit with a book in a café, she can minimize the risk of embarrassment and possibly have more control of the impressions formed of her by others (Goffman 1959). Additionally, she is fully aware that by going out to a bar on her own she might not be able to control others’ responsive treatment of her, and consequently risks being embarrassed and ashamed. For The Naked Truth, when sitting in the café, she can control her public performance by hiding behind the pages of the book and pretending that her loneliness is an outcome of her own choice.
Thus, the performance as a single person that occurs under the observation of others can lead to the risk of embarrassment and shame—in other words, of losing face (Goffman 1967)—and attracting unwanted attention. Turning to Goffman again, the single woman who takes that risk can be seen as a kind of player in a ritual game, one who copes honorably or dishonorably, diplomatically or undiplomatically, with the judgmental contingencies of the situation (ibid., 31). Under these conditions, she cannot manage her presentation of the self and comply with temporal conventions. The Naked Truth’s question also lends a new perspective to Jill Reynolds and Margaret Wetherell’s (2003) argument that singleness is a discourse that orders particular subjectivities. Following this logic, it can be argued that such exposure can ascribe to her the stigmatized subjectivity of the lonely spinster without anyone to go out with.

The fear of appearing as a lonely single woman in public settings is a common concern. One can find plenty of instructional self-help books referring to this issue, or humorous videos aired on YouTube instructing one what to do when dining alone. In an episode of the popular television series Friends, aired on 1997, Rachel—one of the leading characters—tries to convince her friends to join her for dinner in a restaurant. Despite her efforts, she ends up dining alone. The episode depicts Rachel as particularly self-conscious about her aloneness in public. It is at that particular moment she bumps into a man she had made plans to go out with at a later date. The encounter is brief and awkward; but for Rachel, it is now clear that her future date thinks that she is “a total freak” by the mere act of dining by herself in a restaurant.

These representations demonstrate the importance of belonging to the right participation unit at the right time. This correlates with Goffman’s claim that “a single is relatively vulnerable to contact, this being the grounds presumably why the ladies who inhabited traditional etiquette manuals did not appear in public unaccompanied; members of a with, after all, can count on some mutual protection” (Goffman 2010, 20–21). Following Goffman, we can reason that some of the interactional norms underlined in these behavioral and performative protocols render single women as particularly vulnerable to public scrutiny, as their status of being single is revealed as well as the fact that they have no one to count on for protection.

The privilege of civil inattention

The illustrations above provide vivid descriptions as to how single women are aware of the consequences of appearing alone in public. Goffman’s analysis enables us to view the extent to which visibility and vulnerability in public are situational and relational to temporal codes of conduct. Returning to The Naked Truth’s (2008) column, having coffee in a café is connected to day time activities, while going to a bar is related to evening and nighttime ones. As The Naked Truth elucidates, she can manage her self-presentation while having coffee, during the day, in a public café. The café at that time of the day provides her with protection and enables her interaction with the public to pass smoothly. Her participation unit as a single does not breach societal temporal norms, nor does it expose her status as a single woman. Her reflection attests that she feels less vulnerable during periods when she can control the public presentation of
herself. As noted, this protection can be related to the time of the day, the week or the year. For instance, one of the prevailing assumptions that emerges here is that sitting during the day alone does not draw attention to her single status, while doing so at nighttime may trigger such attention.

It can be assumed that her solitary presence at nighttime prevents her from feeling part of the crowd. In contrast, when she goes to a bar with friends she can count on the mutual protection of the members of her participation unit and consequently blend in more easily without drawing unfavorable attention to herself. Thus, her decision to go out by herself during the day time and to avoid appearing by herself at certain times and in certain places is a strategic decision, which also deals with the significant question of agency and self-mastery. As she expresses it, in the café she can hide behind the pages of the book and pretend that her loneliness is an outcome of her own free choice.

These trivial, mundane, interactional rules can be dramatic for many single women. Dining out, going to the cinema, or attending a wedding, a family gathering, or a work-related activity require single women to strategically plan their appearance in public. Appearing at certain times as a single unit poses the risk of exposing her to what can be seen, in Goffmanian (1980) terms, as *uncivil attention*, as opposed to the *civil inattention* she is granted when one appears with a *with*.²

Goffman has observed that one of the commonplace strategies for retaining control of oneself in public is indifference to others. One often adopts modes of civil inattention to strangers, granting them their own *personal space* while seeking to maintain one’s own. Goffman has stressed that civil inattention is not inattention; on the contrary, it recognizes the other’s presence but it assumes respect for the other’s personal space. Moreover, civil inattention is a manner in which people assess each other to gain knowledge and determine that the other does not pose any threat to them.

The injunction to appear as a *with* unit is also apparent in Byrne’s study of single women in Ireland. As she notes:

> The theme of feeling isolated and being excluded by couples is reiterated by single women who explain the reluctance of others to include them in social gatherings. Because they are not partnered, they do not “fit in” or they lack shared interests with friends who are no longer single. Women’s singleness is the problem. It is perceived by others as a problematic status and women are consequentially left out and leave themselves out of family and coupled gatherings. (Byrne 2000, 5)

As Byrne writes, single women feel isolated and excluded from family- and couple-oriented gatherings. Lalli, quoted above, formulates this as an exclusive party to which one has not been invited. The “closed party” metaphor, in this case, refers to her experiencing marginality in a couple-oriented society. However, she ends her column with these statements:

> I do have plans for this Valentine’s Day: I will prepare soup, drink it with whole wheat bread and watch once again the film *Sliding Doors*, just to know that love is waiting for me. On second thoughts, perhaps we will meet here again next Valentine’s Day. (Blue 2007)
The tone is similar to that of many texts written by single women, as they both conform and challenge dominant hegemonic traditional messages with regard to women's roles. However, Lalli's account also conveys a message which values the present, by making her own plans for Valentine's Day. These plans are not solely dependent upon belonging to the coupled unit.

In another column, Michal Shamir, a twenty-eight-year-old single woman discloses her discomfort of arriving unaccompanied to a work-related event:

This year, my workplace posed a challenge which I cannot cope with: to show up with a date for a work-related event. This is the content of the email we received: “... For the very first time we are inviting your partner to celebrate with us the end of the summer happening!” ... I’m a twenty-eight-year-old single woman. I live in Tel Aviv, I’m independent and hard-working ... I love children and dogs ... yet I am still single without any relationship prospects ahead. This is the second time that my work poses a particular challenge: a work-related happening.

As if it isn’t enough to spend weekends alone—the most coupled time frame. As though Saturday mornings, Valentine’s Day and the New Year’s midnight kiss haven’t done a good enough job in making my heart ache for the last five years; here comes the email from our dear CEO, reminding me that I have no one to bring to the event of the summer. All the other employees will be there with their spouses. Some are married and others are coupled. ... In two weeks it will happen, and probably I will deal with this again ... I still believe that life has a funny way of arranging itself. Anything can happen anywhere and at any time. Equipped with a smile ... once again, I will not give up. With or without a partner, I will be there. (Shamir 2012)

At the beginning of the column, Michal describes her working environment as pleasant and supportive. In such an environment, she is at ease and feels that she fits in. The corporate “fun day” represents an interruption to the everyday work routine, and in this sense sets up unexpected social boundaries between her and her partnered coworkers. Moreover, being a single woman, she has already begun to prepare her performance two weeks ahead of time. The invitation, to workers and their partners, conveys a clear message with regard to the expected interactional performance. The invitation to arrive as a “plus one” is considered as normative and natural in many social settings. This interactional etiquette is also commonplace in invitations to weddings and other public social occasions, copying the Noah’s Ark pattern—in twos. As Michal notes, all the workers will be there with their partners. During everyday work time, she blends in and feels at ease in her working environment. However, the corporate fun day changes the status quo.

The plus one invitation poses a particular challenge for her as a single woman. On this occasion, the rules of social interaction change and accordingly her ability to self-master her performance in public alters. The invitation is an unexpected event, which leads her to reflect and re-evaluate her social status and consequently the participation unit she belongs to and is expected to belong to. It is worth noting that in these moments, single women sense that they are losing their individual agency and the ability to successfully manage their performance in public.
The different accounts describe encounters in which single women sense that their projected self is discredited in public. These fears and their attempts to keep their public composure give rise to strategic planning. One popular representation of this dynamic was depicted in Clare Kilner’s film *The Wedding Date* (2005). In this romantic comedy, a single woman in her mid-thirties discovers that her younger sister is getting married. In order not to appear on her own at the wedding, she decides to pay for an escort to accompany her and save her from the public embarrassment of attending her younger sister’s wedding as a single woman.

It could be argued that the Chinese e-commerce website mentioned at the beginning of this chapter has turned this comedic plot device into reality. It offers a date which enables Chinese single people to visit their parents for the New Year’s holiday without losing face, and to comply accordingly with the social temporal expectancies demanded of them. The voices of the single women represented here understand perfectly well what Goffman (1959) has stressed regarding the importance of maintaining one’s composure and succeeding in introducing favorable information about oneself.

Building on Goffman, this chapter has developed a dramaturgical perspective to time studies, showing how the shaping of one’s identity and social relations is also temporally determined. Valentine’s Day, New Year’s Eve, the holiday seasons, wedding rituals, dinner or nighttime, the weekends: all are significant temporal markers, which play an important part in the lives of single women. In a couple- and familial-oriented world, they often determine single women’s agentic capacities, and their hyper-visible yet invisible presence in public. As this chapter has shown, belonging to the appropriate and required participation unit becomes ever more crucial at particular times. Moreover, the temporal divisions between night and day, weekday and weekends, and work and leisure have significant bearing on the single woman’s ability to successfully project a desired impression in public. The accounts, by and about single women, described here attest to their deep understanding of the social risks entailed in appearing in public unaccompanied, and how this leads to their heightened visibility and exposure as being single in a very couple-oriented world.

**Notes**

1. In Israel the weekend begins on a Friday.
2. For further discussion of uncivil attention, see also Gardner (1995) and Garland-Thomson (2009).