LETTERS TO THE PUBLIC EDITOR
Female and Spouseless
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A “tipping point” is the point at which something suddenly accelerates or becomes more significant. A “milestone” is the point at which something is labeled in a remarkable way. A milestone is symbolic; a tipping point is significant for the trend itself.

One of the problems with the story about the majority of women living without a spouse – and why it ended up on Page 1 – is confusion over tipping points versus milestones. If being single were an epidemic, there might be a point at which it became so popular that it started to spread with increasing speed. That would be a tipping point. If it reaches a number that, for an arbitrary reason, seems significant – like 50 percent – then it has reached a milestone.

The article quoted the demographer William H. Frey twice misusing the term “tipping point” to mean milestone or “culmination” of a trend. This misuse had the effect of pumping up the importance of the story, making the 51 percent milestone seem like news.

In fact, there was no real reason to play up the story at this moment – and no reason not to.

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Chapel Hill, N.C., Feb. 11, 2007
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