

Living Arrangements, Socio-Economic Position and Well-Being in Old Age – a Regional Perspective in Europe

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Background

Living alone in old age has become a mainstream phenomenon in many regions of Europe. Often, it has been found that people living alone have worse health and well-being status compared to people living in other arrangements (e.g. Zueras et al., 2020; Gaymu & Springer, 2012; Forward et al., 2022). However, some regional differences exist with Northern and Western Europe indicating somewhat more beneficial effects for those living alone compared to people living in countries where familialistic configurations are more common (Requena & Reher, 2020). The beneficial association appearing in some regions may be related to better economic resources accrued over the life time in these regions. However, it is still not clear how socio-economic position at different periods of life may be related with the association between living arrangements and well-being in later life, especially with regard to Eastern Europe.

Demographic trends have contributed to the changing patterns and prevalence of living arrangements in European countries differently. Increasing life expectancy creates the opportunity for couples to enjoy longer lives spent together. At the same time, divorce and separation having become more accepted with time may contribute to more people living alone while re-partnering may counterbalance this. The long-lasting gender gap in life expectancy adds higher proportions of widowed among women in older ages, who depending on the cultural patterns, either join those living alone or those living with others as most dominant arrangements in old age. Postponing childbearing contributes to the empty nest living arrangement starting much later in life than in the previous decades. In order to focus on ageing-related challenges and outcomes, and to better capture the association between living arrangements and well-being in old age, we focus here on population aged 65 and above.

The literature on associations between living arrangements and well-being in old age has addressed well-being using different measures and thus conclusive results across European regions are hard to draw. Living alone has not been associated with lower well-being in Northern Europe while such an association has been confirmed for England and Wales, Western, Southern and Eastern Europe, indicating to a greater role of family support in these regions (Young & Grundy, 2009). Similarly, Zueras and colleagues (2020) found higher mortality risks among older people who live with others compared to those who live with a partner. Significant differences in well-being (defined as life satisfaction or different health indicators, for example) by various living arrangements have been found by others (Gaymu and Springer, 2012; Forward et al., 2020). Hank and Wagner (2013) report that childless older people in Europe fare generally worse in their economic, social and psychological well-being compared to parents. Although being partnered protects from worse well-being somewhat, it emerges only if respondents are satisfied with the reciprocity within the partner relationship. Among older adults in Estonia, well-being is best among those living alone, while well-being for those living in other arrangements does not differ from those living as a couple. Similarly, life satisfaction for solo dwellers does not differ from life satisfaction of those living as a couple. (Sakkeus et al., 2023a).

Read and her colleagues (2016) find in their literature review of studies published between 1995-2013 that in more than half of the cases worse socio-economic position (SEP) was associated with poorer quality of life in later life. However, they also pointed towards research gaps with lacking research in Eastern Europe, using longitudinal settings and looking at mediators that might alleviate the association. The magnitude of socioeconomic inequality in the quality of life of Europeans in early old age has been studied by Niedzwiedz and her colleagues (2014). They concluded that individuals in more generous welfare regimes experienced higher levels of quality of life, as well as narrower socioeconomic inequalities in quality of life. Sakkeus and her colleagues (2023b) have found for Estonia that more disadvantageous circumstances in childhood do not have a greater effect on later life well-being, as adulthood SEP has a somewhat compensatory effect. Among the studies where associations between living arrangements and well-being have been considered, life course socio-economic indicators have not been included usually. In general, favourable current socio-economic conditions seem to decrease the differences in associations between living arrangements and well-being (Young & Grundy, 2009; Gaymu & Springer 2012; Forward et al. 2022).

The main objective of this article is to understand what are the associations between well-being and living arrangements in old age in different European regions, taking into account childhood and adulthood socio-economic positions of individuals.

Data and Methods

We use the SHARE wave 7 data, which for the first time covered most of the European countries. We have grouped countries into the following seven regions: the Baltics (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia); Central Eastern Europe or CEE (Czechia, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia); Nordic countries (Sweden, Denmark, Finland); Germanic countries (Austria, Germany, Switzerland); Francophone countries (France, Belgium, Luxembourg); Southern Europe (Spain, Italy, Greece, Portugal, Cyprus, Malta); and South Eastern Europe or SEE (Slovenia, Croatia, Bulgaria, Romania). Our main variable of interest is well-being, based on the CASP-12 instrument (Hyde et al. 2003). The main independent variable is the living arrangement type: living alone, in a couple, couple with others, or living with others. Although living alone in old age has become one of the main arrangements, in particular for women, there are still variations in living arrangements such as living in other possible configurations, which we have combined together as “other” living arrangements.

We control for main characteristics which have been usually associated with well-being. These include age, gender, disability status, origin (migrant or born in the country), number of children ever born, legal marital status (married and registered partnerships, never married, divorced and widowed). We also account for childhood economic circumstances (rooms per capita, no. of books, number of amenities, childhood family’s financial position) and adulthood socio-economic position (SEP), including educational attainment level, current household income and current household net wealth. Both childhood and adulthood SEP-s have been standardised using the methodology introduced by Niedzwiedz and her colleagues. (2015). We include only people aged 65 and above, including over 48,000 individuals in the analysis.

Hypotheses

Our hypothesis is that in countries with higher social equity, more emphasis on individual empowerment and more generous welfare states, the well-being of people living alone would not differ from those living in all other arrangements. In economically more deprived countries and that

are more familialistic in their service organisation, the well-being of those living in couples would be the highest, and those living alone would be the lowest.

In terms of childhood and adulthood socio-economic position we expect the worse circumstances to increase the differences between well-being and living arrangement associations within regions.

Preliminary Findings

We find that the highest share of those living alone is visible for the Baltics, followed by Francophone and Germanic countries, explained by these regions having been characterised with the spread of divorce and cohabitation as well as larger gender gap in life expectancy (in particular in the Baltics). The highest share of those who are disabled can be also found in the Baltics, followed by CEE and SEE countries – these countries have been described by a long-term neglect of one's health, and a lagging adjustment of the health care systems to address new challenges. The highest shares of migrants can be found in the Baltics, in Germanic and Francophone countries, followed closely by SEE. The population in our sample is the oldest in the Baltics, in Francophone countries and in Southern Europe.

There are regional variations in how different living arrangements manifest in later life. Countries with a historically large gender gap such as the Baltics, have the largest share of people living alone and the smallest share of those living as a couple in old age. Over 50% of women aged 65+ live alone in the Baltics as a result of a long-term gender gap in life expectancy coupled with the process of emancipation of women being on par with the Nordic countries (Puur et al. 2012; Puur et al. 2016). In terms of living alone, Francophone and Germanic regions follow with their high proportions. The Nordic region stands out among the 65+ ages with the highest share of those living as couples, among both men and women. Both the CEE and SEE regions are much more similar to Southern Europe, with the highest share of couples living with others or living with others. The latter two arrangements are relatively common also in the Baltics.

The models run for the whole European level, after controlling for different variables and regions, indicate that living in a couple is positively associated with well-being, followed by couples living with others. In Europe, living with others is negatively associated with well-being compared to those living alone. Most European regions, have better well-being compared to the Baltic countries, except for Southern Europe who are similar to the Baltics.

After adding the childhood and adulthood SEP in our analysis, the associations change. Worse socio-economic life time position makes living in a couple with others most beneficial for well-being in later life compared to living alone. This living arrangement is followed by those living as a couple, and also those living with others indicate now a positive association with well-being. Worse childhood and adulthood economic position also change the regional differences in this association: Southern Europe remains with the worse well-being, South Eastern Europe do not differ anymore from the Baltics, but well-being for Central Eastern Europe remains better. Compared to the Baltics, the highest well-being is in Germanic countries, followed by Nordic and Francophone countries.

Next steps

Next, we will assess more thoroughly how the associations of living arrangements with well-being evolve within each separate region, taking into account lifetime accumulation of socio-economic position.

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