A life-course approach to singlehood

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Abstract

Demography has a blind spot for the topic of singlehood. This partially results from the multifaceted nature of the concept. It can mean multiple things, like never married, living alone, not living with a partner, not having someone that one considers a partner, and more. It also results from demographers' fascination with events, like starting a partner relationship and ending it. Particularly little attention is given to singlehood during the life phase in which the establishment of a family, including living with a partner and parenthood, are often considered the norm, that is between the ages of 30 and 50.
This paper aims to contribute to establishing a life-course approach to singlehood by answering four questions:

1) How common is singlehood between the ages of 30 and 50?
2) How much time – on average – is spent in singlehood between the ages of 30 and 50?
3) What kind of different patterns of singlehood can be distinguished between the ages of 30 and 50?
4) How much diversity exists in these patterns, between men and women, between people from different socioeconomic classes, between cohorts and between European countries?

These questions will be answered with data from European countries, participating in the GGS and FFS. Respondents aged 50 and over will be selected, and their singlehood trajectories up till age 50 will be reconstructed. Singlehood will be operationalized as the time spent not living with a partner. Regression and sequence analytical tools will be used to analyze the data.

Introduction

Singlehood is a fuzzy concept. Depending on the focus of interest, it can be used to describe at least six different, albeit related phenomena:

1. It can refer to marital status: those who have never been married;
2. It can refer to 'extended' marital status: those who never have lived with a partner (Bellani et al. 2017);
3. It can refer to partner status more general: those who do not have a person they consider their partner (irrespective of coresidence) (Poortman & Liefbroer, 2010);
4. It can refer to coresidential status: those who are living alone (Esteve et al., 2020);
5 . It can refer to coresidential partner status: those who are not living with a partner (Liefbroer et al., 2015);
6. It can refer to not living with parents and not living with a partner. A stage of independence of either parents or a partner (Van den Berg & Verbakel, 2022).

Mortelmans et al. (2023) examine existing usage of the term singlehood and distinguish between two key dimensions. The *relational* dimension refers to those who do have a person whom they consider to be their partner, irrespective of whether they cohabit with this partner or not. The *household* dimension refers to whether people live in a one-person household or in a multiple-person household. Although Mortelmans et al. (2023) present the most elaborate conceptual analysis of singlehood to date, their analysis also shows the difficulties of coming up with a satisfying definition. For instance, people who only live with children are still classified as singles along the household dimension and are considered as singles even if they are in a dating or LAT relationship (Mortelmans et al., 2023, Table 2).

Singlehood is not only a fuzzy concept, it is also a contested one. Often, the assumption is that singles fare worse in economic and well-being terms than those who live with a partner. A lot of research underscores this point of view. At the same time, singlehood is increasingly framed as a positive life choice, either as an intentional choice not to marry or to live with a partner (Lahad, 2017), or as a representation of "the importance conceded to the individual and to individual goals at the expense, basically, of the family" (Esteve et al., 2020). Overall, the literature suggests that it might be important to acknowledge diversity within the experience of singlehood. It can mean different things to different people and there is huge variation in the lived experiences and outcomes of singlehood.

A life-course approach to singlehood is still largely lacking. Much research focusses on specific stages of the life course, such as young adulthood (Van den Berg & Verbakel , 2022) or later life (Reher & Requena, 2018). Research that includes the whole life course, often is based on the cross-sectional prevalence of singlehood at specific ages (Esteve et al, 2020; Fokkema & Liefbroer, 2008). From a life-course perspective, important descriptive questions would include (1) how much time people spend in singlehood, (2) in which stages of the life course they do so, (3) who have never spent any time in a partnership (thus being continuously single), and (4) what trajectories of singlehood can be distinguished? Based on the answers to these questions, a next step would include understanding the precursors of these singlehood trajectories and understanding their potential consequences for other life domains. An additional challenge for a life-course perspective on singlehood is that it is relatively easy to pose retrospective questions on the partners with whom one has cohabited over the life course, but that it is harder to pose retrospective questions on past non-cohabiting partners and past other members of the household. People may find it cumbersome to remember all relevant details, in particular the starting and ending dates of such relationships, or they might retrospectively redefine who qualified as a non-cohabiting partner and who did not. For that reason, a life-course focus on whether people lived with a partner or not constitutes an easier to implement, albeit more restricted way of studying singlehood.

Particularly little attention is given to singlehood during the life phase in which the establishment of a family, including living with a partner and parenthood, are often considered the norm, that is between the ages of 30 and 50. Being single during this life stage may have far-reaching consequences, for instance concerning one's ability to establish oneself on the housing market or for one's level of social integration. Therefore, this paper focusses on this life stage. It aims to answer four questions:

1. How common is singlehood between the ages of 30 and 50?
2. How much time – on average – is spent in singlehood between the ages of 30 and 50?
3. What kind of different patterns of singlehood can be distinguished between the ages of 30 and 50?

4. How much diversity exists in these patterns, between men and women, between people from different socioeconomic classes, between cohorts and between European countries?

Data and Method

Data will be used from the Generations and Gender Survey (Rounds 1 and 2) and the Family and Fertility Survey. The selection of countries will be based on availability of data from GGS Round 2, as this assures that I can follow cohorts that recently passed the age of 50. This implies that I will include – at a minimum – data from Norway, Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Estonia, the UK, the Netherlands, France, Germany, Austria and Croatia. By combining data from GGS and FFS, I will be able to compare a large set of cohorts to study cohort changes in singlehood among adults.

Key independent variables that will be included in the models are gender, cohort and parental SES.

I will construct a file with yearly information on whether respondents are living with a partner or not, and apply both simple summary statistics and sequence analysis to establish the patterns of singlehood during mid-adulthood. Regression analysis will be applied to examine diversity in the patterns of singlehood.

Expected results

I expect that the likelihood of singlehood (both in terms of the percentage of people spending part of their lives between ages of 30 and 50 being single and in terms of the average duration of singlehood during this 20-year spell) will increase over cohorts and will be higher in countries that are further advanced in the Second Demographic Transition. I expect that the overall likelihood of singlehood will not vary strongly between men and women, but that men are more likely to be single during the full 20 years between the ages of 30 and 50, and women more likely to be single for longer durations if they are not single for the whole period. I also expect different patterns by parental SES, with men from a low SES background and women from a high SES background being more likely to be single during this period.

To provide a sneak preview on the topic, I calculated some relevant figures on singlehood between ages 30 and 50, based on data from the Dutch GGS Round 2, collected until October 2023. Of all respondents who were between ages 50 and 59 at the time of the survey (and so were born between 1964 and 1973), 58.0% had continuously lived with a partner between ages 30 and 50, 34.7% had lived part of the time with a partner between ages 30 and 50, and 7.3% had not lived with a partner at all between ages 30 and 50. Of those latter, the average duration of singlehood between ages 30 and 50 was just over 6 years. Slightly more men than women had lived as single for the whole period (8.0 versus 6.8%). So, in all, more than 40% of respondents had lived all or part of their lives between ages 30 and 50 not with a partner, which is a considerable percentage.

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