Are the Lifelong Single Satisfied with Being Single? The Link Between Past Intimate Relationships, Social Networks and Singlehood

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Abstract

The pool of single people is diverse including individuals who had either a past intimate LAT or a coresidential partner, but also those who never had an intimate partner, who have been lifelong single. This study bridges the sociological and psychological literature in shedding light on how those who had a LAT or a coresidential partner differ from the lifelong singles in their assessment of satisfaction with being single. As social support is part and parcel of a satisfied life, this paper also asks how satisfaction with friends and frequency of contacting parents is associated with satisfaction with singlehood. Satisfaction with being single is a subjective well-being measure, indicating how people accept their singlehood within a society where having a partner is strongly associated with a fulfilled and happy life. Data from the German Family Panel is used to identify the past intimate relationships of those single in the birth cohort 1971-1973. The results, based on linear regression analysis, suggest that lifelong singles are more satisfied with their singlehood compared to those who had a past intimate relationship. A higher satisfaction with friends and keeping in contact with parents are related to higher satisfaction with singlehood. Yet, lifelong singles appear to receive less social support than those who had past intimate relationships. The results point to the heterogeneity of those lifelong single who might or might not have chosen to be single, and how a partner is not the only prerequisite for a fulfilling life.

Introduction

The concept of singlehood is ambiguous and its definition varies. Previous research has defined singlehood in different ways depending on the available data, on the methodological approach or aim of the research. On one hand, singlehood is usually defined as not being in a coresidential relationship (Dykstra and Poortman, 2010; Wiik and Dommermuth, 2014), but also as being never married (Pudrovska *et al.*, 2006; Ermer and Proulx, 2019), living without a partner (Perelli-Harris *et al.*, 2018; Ermer and Proulx, 2019) or living alone (Klinenberg, 2012). Nonetheless, these definitions include some of the individuals who might actually have a non-coresidential intimate partner (a LAT partner). On the other hand, the concept of lifelong singlehood is defined differently by the demographic and gerontological literature and this has implications on the results. Firstly, the demographic literature defines a lifelong single as someone who never experienced a coresidential relationship by the age of 40 (Bellani *et al.*, 2017). This is problematic since those without coresidential experience are a heterogenous group encompassing a) those who never had any intimate relationship and b) those who had only LAT relationships. Not distinguishing between these two intimate relationship histories might paint a blurred picture about the characteristics and the experiences of the lifelong singles. Secondly, the gerontological literature considers a lifelong single someone who is never married (and childless) over the age of 60 (Baumbusch, 2004; Timonen and Doyle, 2013) or someone who is not remarried over the age of 60 (Band-Winterstein and Manchik-Rimon, 2014). This definition has led gerontologists to explain the reasons people ascribe for not (re)marrying at a later stage in life. However, these people are not lifelong singles since they had previous intimate coresidential and/or non-coresidential (LAT) relationships (Baumbusch, 2004; Timonen and Doyle, 2013; Band-Winterstein and Manchik-Rimon, 2014).

This study aims to fill in the conceptual gaps on singlehood contributing to the literature with a clearer definition of both concepts -lifelong singlehood and singlehood - providing a better-quality picture about these individuals. This chapter defines being single as being unpartnered. A lifelong single is defined as someone unpartnered who never had any previous intimate relationship in their adulthood. This person can live alone or in a multiple-person household. This person can be childless but not necessarily. Some lifelong singles are lone parents or could have children who are the result of adoption, artificially insemination or forced sex. This definition suggests that these unpartnered individuals had never had any intimate coresidential or LAT relationship experience. This definition is a unique contribution to the literature and it is based on rich data on retrospective relationships history which gives the opportunity to move beyond the general categories of marital status. The group of those unpartnered with no past intimate relationship or those who never had a coresidential relationship but had only LAT relationships has not received any attention in the demographic literature.

It is important to distinguish between past intimate relationship experiences of those unpartnered. Most of the demographic literature on the link between marital status and well-being has emphasised the poor well-being of those single (divorced, separated, never married) compared to those married (Marks, 1996; Soons and Liefbroer, 2008; Wright and Brown, 2017; Verbakel, 2012; Perelli-Harris *et al.*, 2018). Few studies have compared the well-being of those single ever married to those never married. These studies have focused on the simple marital status showing that those divorced and widowed have worse psychological well-being than those never married in midlife (US:Pearlin and Johnson, 1977; Norway:Reneflot and Mamelund, 2011) and at later life stages (in US: Pudrovska *et al.*, 2006). These conclusions are based on old data and descriptive results (Pearlin and Johnson, 1977), on non-representative data (Pudrovska *et al.*, 2006) and on a sample of people who could have a LAT partner (Pudrovska *et al.*, 2006; Pearlin and Johnson, 1977; Norway:Reneflot and Mamelund, 2011). Nonetheless, the literature on marital status and well-being underlines the negative effects of a relationship break-up on one's well-being. To date, no study has examined the past intimate relationships of those single and their well-being given the heterogeneity in the pool of single people. Among single people lifelong singles can be very different than those ever partnered in aspects of well-being.

Recent evidence indicates that singles who had a coresidential relationship compared to those who never had one are more likely to favour being in a relationship rather than being single (in the Netherlands: Poortman and Liefbroer, 2010). Furthermore, in general, singles want to be in a relationship rather than staying single (in the Netherlands: Poortman and Liefbroer, 2010). These studies stress the desire to be (re)partnered. The need to belong is a natural drive in forming and maintaining meaningful social connections which, in turn, sustain people's well-being (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). An intimate partner fulfils not only the need to belong but also the needs for intimacy and approval. A partner provides sexual intimacy, social and emotional support all of which are related to increased levels of well-being. This dynamic is embedded within the Western ideology of marriage and family which cultivates the convention that being in a long-term romantic relationship and a parent are the most important and meaningful social relationships (DePaulo and Morris, 2005a; Day *et al.*, 2011).

However, this ideology is criticised by sociologists and psychologists whose research based on qualitative methods informs that singlehood is actually constructed around a positive identity (Stein, 1975; Loewenstein *et al.*, 1981; DePaulo and Morris, 2005a; Budgeon, 2008). This literature highlights the importance of social networks in replacing the absence of an intimate partner, in terms of social support, social belonging and emotional bond. These studies also suggest that not everyone has the desire to repartner. Evidence shows that the singles are happier and feel higher

personal empowerment compared to when they had an intimate LAT or coresidential partner (Stein, 1975; Budgeon, 2008), indicating that remaining single is a choice. Singlehood is valued even among those for whom singlehood was a result of some external circumstances, some studies indicating that people had 'fallen in love' with the independence and freedom a single lifestyle offers (Band-Winterstein and Manchik-Rimon, 2014; Sharp and Ganong, 2007). Cagan (2004) coins the term 'quirkyalone' to define this new increasing trend of single people who enjoy being single, accepting their relationship status while finding happiness, fulfilment and confidence within themselves. Although quirkyalones value friendship highly, they are not antilove – they would cherish a romantic relationship if it comes. Social scientists, who study single people, have started to be active on social media underlying the advantages of being single (DePaulo, 2019a). Facebook groups such as the 'Community of Single People' or blogs such as 'Single at Heart', created by DePaulo (DePaulo, 2019b) aim to facilitate the interaction among single people, helping in creating a social identity of singlehood. Hence, the satisfaction with being single is at the core of these social media activities, which shed positive light on being single in today's society where the ideology of being in a (married) relationship and having children is perpetuated as the key to having a fulfilled life (DePaulo and Morris, 2006; Budgeon, 2008).

Despite the qualitative literature identifying that singlehood is constructed as a positive image, the psychological studies warn about the negative stereotype and the social stigma attached to singlehood. Single people are stigmatized and negatively stereotyped compared to partnered people: singles are perceived as being more immature, lonely, miserable, self-centred as well as less happy, attractive, sociable, warm and caring (DePaulo and Morris, 2005a; DePaulo and Morris, 2005b; DePaulo and Morris, 2006; Greitemeyer, 2009; Slonim *et al.*, 2015). The negative attitudes are even stronger as single people become older (40 years old) (Hertel *et al.*, 2007; Morris *et al.*, 2008). Discrimination against single people has been noted in the housing market too (Morris *et al.*, 2008). This is called singlism (DePaulo and Morris, 2006). The state laws usually offer more benefits to married people such as tax breaks and a greater number of opportunities to get high quality care and health insurance. Governments are making assumptions on family to provide care to old generations but those who remained single throughout adulthood have no family to provide care for them. Evidence from the UK warms about the potential socio-economic adversities that childless men living alone in late mid-life, without any coresidential relationship, not owner-occupier and lone mothers without house equity would face when entering subsequent life stages (Demey *et al.*, 2013). These individuals might be at risk to benefit from low individual pension entitlements and the state needs to meet the care and financial needs of these people.

It is important to investigate how single people feel with their status of being single since both the quantitative and the qualitative social science literature on the experiences of single people offer

mixed results. In this study, I use satisfaction with being single as an indicator of well-being. In other words, satisfaction with being single indicates how people feel with their relationship status as being single. To date, there are no studies comparing the satisfaction with being single of those who had intimate coresidential or LAT relationship relative to those lifelong singles. It is not clear what is associated with the satisfaction of being single and what is the role of past intimate relationships. This study sheds light on the link between past intimate relationships and satisfaction with being single in Germany. Germany is one of the countries with the highest share of one-person household among those ages 30-50, together with Sweden and the Netherlands (Sandström and Karlsson, 2019). The mean age of marriage for women increased from 25.9 years in 1990 to 31 years in 2014 and for men it increased from 28.4 in 1990 to 33.7 years in 2014 (UNECE Statistical Database, 2019). This suggests that more people are never married and living alone compared with two decades ago. These never married people could have had at least one previous relationship experience with a cohabiting partner or LAT partner. Recent research has noted the existence of serial cohabitation (for West Germany) for a small proportion of people in their mid-thirties. It is also possible that some of the single people to be without any intimate relationship at all. This study also investigates the role of social network on satisfaction with being single among unpartnered people in their mid-thirties.

Background

The stress/crisis theory

The stress/crisis theory underlines that marital status differences in well-being arise from the economic, physical and emotional disorders together with concomitant network disruptions related to relationship dissolution (Bloom *et al.*, 1978; Booth and Amato, 1991). Firstly, a coresidential break-up has been linked to economic distress, especially for women (Umberson *et al.*, 1992; Kalmijn and van Groenou, 2005). Among women, mothers with depended children experience serious economic hardship (in US: Shapiro, 1996; in UK: Stack and Meredith, 2018). Moving out, dividing a house or material possessions are other economic stressful outcomes of a coresidential relationship. For example, following separation from a coresidential relationship, individuals are likely to move to temporary accommodation, smaller dwellings, and dwellings of lower quality (in UK: Feijten, 2005; Feijten and Ham, 2010) and this may reduce their well-being. Conversely, the lifelong singles do not experience any of these economic stressful events which result from a break-up since they never had a partner. Lifelong singles might instead be more used to rely only on their economic resources. Similarly, those who had only LAT relationship do not experience these economic hardships since they did not have a coresidential experience.

Secondly, research indicates that those who divorced are exposed to the loss of joint (marital) social networks (Terhell *et al.*, 2004; Kalmijn and van Groenou, 2005; McDermott *et al.*, 2013). This may be because people who were in a couple find fewer things in common with their coupled friends and former friends take the side of one of the partners to provide support (Johnson and Campbell, 1988; Wallerstein *et al.*, 2000; Terhell *et al.*, 2004; McDermott *et al.*, 2013). Additionally, newly single divorced may be considered as a threat by their married friends who worry about mate poaching (i.e. i.e. romantically attracting someone who is already in a relationship) (Schmitt *et al.*, 2004). Moreover, the loss of a spouse who had the social role of being the best friend for the other partner (Grover and Helliwell, 2019) might reduce the latter's well-being. However, the remaining relationships with close or individual friends and kin appear to be intensified (Miller *et al.*, 1998; Greif and Deal, 2012). Therefore, some divorcees can experience network gains, particularly in the long run (Kalmijn and van Groenou, 2005). Conversely, the lifelong single may enjoy continuous, well-established friendships without going through the stress triggered by the social disrupture associated with a break-up. To the best of my knowledge, there is no literature on the implications of the dissolution of a LAT relationship on the social resources of the ex-partners. However, I assume that those who had only LAT relationships could also experience the loss of the joint social network and this, in turn, could reduce the satisfaction with being single.

Lastly, losing either a spouse, a cohabiting or a LAT partner is usually accompanied by stress, sadness and anger (Mastekaasa, 1994; Sprecher *et al.*, 1998; Sbarra and Emery, 2005; Rhoades *et al.*, 2011). There is also evidence that a break-up may reduce stress and could increase well-being, especially for the initiators of the break-up who were not happy in the relationship (Sprecher, 1994; Sprecher *et al.*, 1998; Kamp Dush *et al.*, 2008). Nonetheless, a relationship break-up generally leads to decreased well-being (Perilloux and Buss, 2008) and is usually associated with difficulty adjusting to the loss and 'letting go' (Mearns, 1991; Belu *et al.*, 2016). This taps into the emotional turmoil of a relationship dissolution on individuals' well-being as the emotional and sexual intimacy, companionship and emotional support are lost. Therefore, I assume that having had either only a LAT or a coresidential past relationship is related to low well-being compared to lifelong singlehood.

In sum, the resource and stress/crises explanations lead to the expectation that the negative impact of well-being may be stronger for those who had a LAT or/and coresidential relationships compared to lifelong singles. Only one quantitative study investigated the differences in the experiences of the single strain (an indicator measuring difficulties to be single in terms of intimacy, social life, companionship and care) by marital status among unmarried people over 65 years old (Pudrovska *et al.*, 2006). The results indicate that those never divorced or widowed unmarried had a higher single strain than never-marrieds. However, these results are based on a non-representative sample where single people could have a LAT partner. Lifelong singlehood, as defined in this chapter, may differ from those who ever had an intimate partner in terms of strains, resources and

social relationships. Since no spouse or partner existed to provide social support, companionship and sexual intimacy the lifelong singles might generally be more self-reliant. However, those who have not experienced an intimate relationship by mid-thirties might suffer more from the lack of support, encouragement and security typically provided by a romantic partner (Baumeister and Leary, 1995) and thus be more likely to report lower satisfaction with being single. Because it is not clear how having a previous coresidential or LAT union compared to having been a lifelong single is associated with satisfaction with being single, no explicit hypotheses are formulated.

The Life Course Framework

The life course theory is another theoretical framework used in this paper to explain the potential negative outcome in the well-being of those who had past intimate relationships over being a lifelong single. The life course framework assumes that past life events and transitions are related to how people evaluate current situations. The life course framework stipulates that a transition changes slowly one's life course trajectory whereas an event causes an abrupt change in one's life course trajectory (Elder, 1994; Settersten and Mayer, 1997).

In this paper, I conceptualise past intimate relationships as part of life course experiences which could impact the satisfaction with being single. I assume that the lifelong singles would be more satisfied with being single since they have experienced neither a relationship transition (they were always single) nor the sudden event of losing an intimate partner. In contrast, those unpartnered who had been in either a LAT or a coresidential relationship experienced both the transition from being in a relationship to being single and the event of losing their partner. These experiences might be associated with low satisfaction with being single. This can be the case especially if people have invested a lot in the relationship. The psychological literature explains that the sudden event of losing a partner produces changes in one's self-concept by reducing one' self-concept clarity, which causes emotional stress (Slotter *et al.*, 2010). Partners overlap self-concepts by developing shared friends and participating in joint social activities (Aron *et al.*, 1991). Once a relationship is finished people enter a process of redefining themselves without a partner. Usually, after a break-up people feel confused and incomplete and need to redefine themselves alone, without their ex-partner, which can be related to dissatisfaction with being single. Poortman and Liefbroer's (2010) emphasise that single individuals who had been in a coresidential relationship compared to those single without coresidential experience expressed more positive attitudes towards being in a relationship relative to being single. They explain that those with a past coresidential experience may have become used to live with a partner and may have more problems being on their own.

Having experienced only LAT relationships might be no different than having no past intimate relationships on satisfaction with being since LAT relationships are short-lived (Régnier-Loilier, 2016; Krapf, 2017), indicating that people did not have enough time to commit. Nonetheless, it can be that having experienced only LAT relationships, especially if the individuals were happy,

committed or invested emotionally, is different than having been lifelong single. Therefore, those who had only LAT relationships relative to having been lifelong single may be less satisfied with being single since people might miss the intimacy they shared with a partner.

On the other hand, having experienced a relationship break-up where people were not happy in the relationship may be related to higher satisfaction with being single compared to lifelong singles. Studies underline that being involved in a low-quality romantic relationship provides more negative (health) well-being outcomes than being single (Holt-Lunstad *et al.*, 2008). People reported growth after a relationship break-up, especially if they were unhappy in the relationship (Tashiro and Frazier, 2003). One study shows that having had multiple coresidential relationships decreased the chances to repartner compared to those who never had any coresidential relationship (in Netherlands: Poortman, 2007). This results might suggest that single people with multiple (coresidential) relationships might be happier with being single compared to those who never had any (coresidential) relationship. Because it is not clear how having a previous coresidential or LAT union compared to having been lifelong single is associated with satisfaction with being single, no explicit hypotheses are formulated.

Pathways into singlehood: choice vs constraint

Pathways to singlehood and lifelong singlehood (generally defined in the existing literature as never married or not remarried during adulthood) are driven by either people's conscious choice or external circumstances related to socio-economic or historical conditions present during one's young adulthood (Stein, 1975; Baumbusch, 2004; Budgeon, 2008; Timonen and Doyle, 2013; Band-Winterstein and Manchik-Rimon, 2014). The qualitative sociological literature has made the division into 'choice' and 'circumstance' (sometimes refereed at as 'constraint') according to people's narratives of their marital history at the time of interview since they tended to talk either of the unfortunate circumstances or the choices they had made to remain unmarried across their adult lives (Timonen and Doyle, 2013).

Those who chose to be single generally evaluated that being in a relationship would have a negative impact on achieving higher education (Stein, 1975), pursuing future career goals (Budgeon, 2008), building friendships, organising a personal schedule and finances (Timonen and Doyle, 2013; Band-Winterstein and Manchik-Rimon, 2014), and undergoing self-development as a relationship or marriage would be too restrictive (Loewenstein *et al.*, 1981; Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003; Baumbusch, 2004; Budgeon, 2008). The personal fulfilment and self-empowerment experienced after breaking-up from previous relationships are other reasons for which people want to stay single (Loewenstein *et al.*, 1981; Budgeon, 2008). Additional to these reasons, the freedom from caregiving commitments was pregnant in the narratives of the old not married. Participants wanted to avoid coping with the burden of an ageing partner, perceived as potentially sick, needy and requiring much attention and sacrifice (Band-Winterstein and Manchik-Rimon, 2014).

For others, singlehood was a result of external circumstances related either to family duties (the obligation to provide extensive care for family) or to socio-economic constraints or historical conditions during people's young adulthood (Baumbusch, 2004; Timonen and Doyle, 2013; Band-Winterstein and Manchik-Rimon, 2014). The need for extensive care of family members limited the opportunity to get employed, socialize and meet potential partners (Timonen and Doyle, 2013). The historical conditions of the Great Depression and the Second World War, during women's adulthood, associated with poverty, unemployment, and a narrow pool of men contributed to be single by circumstance (Baumbusch, 2004). Low earning power, migratory history from rural to urban areas, the need to pay for secondary education, and precarious employment contributed to Irish people born between 1930-1950 to remain unmarried during adulthood (Timonen and Doyle, 2013). In general, the gerontological literature shows that cohorts born before the Second World War were powerfully constraint in their choice of marital status by their low socio-economic conditions and cultural-normative factors prohibitive of marriage among those poor (Baumbusch, 2004; Timonen and Doyle, 2013).

Nonetheless, the common feature of all these studies is that although not originally a chosen decision in every case, singlehood had become a way of life where singles value the independence and freedom to manage their self-identity and to organise their social relationships, which are a source of meaning and content to their life. Some authors discuss about 'falling in love' with singlehood when analysing the narratives of those in old ages for whom singlehood was not the result of a conscious choice during their adulthood but became comfortable with this status over the years (Band-Winterstein and Manchik-Rimon, 2014). In response to uncertainty about their relationship status and external pressure to have a relationship, some participants learnt to think optimistically focusing on advantages of being single (Sharp and Ganong, 2007), altered their expectations, and leant to value themselves as being single while ageing (Dalton, 1992; Davies, 2003). Although not explicitly stated in these studies, since singlehood was not a chosen status, the advantages of being single in these people's narratives might have been a process of rationalization whereby people reduced their cognitive dissonances. A cognitive dissonance is the psychological discomfort which arises from facts that reality contradicts people's beliefs and ideals (Festinger, 1957). Therefore, to reduce their mental discomfort of having been single by circumstance old people might have changed their attitude about singlehood during their life course.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to examine in-depth who are the lifelong singles. However, in light of this biography of choice or constraint I assume that in my sample the lifelong singles had either chosen or had been constraint to have any intimate relationship. Irrespective of the pathways to lifelong singlehood, I consider that lifelong singles might have higher satisfaction with being single compared to those who had an intimate relationship because they either never wanted a partner or they had accepted their relationship status learning to be happy without a partner.

Quirkyalone, single at heart or asexual?

Some qualitative studies underline that even if singleness was constructed as a positive identity through repertoires of choice, independence, self-development, some women talked about their desire to have an intimate relationship (Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003; Sharp and Ganong, 2007; Budgeon, 2008), the lack of a sexual partner being mentioned as disadvantage of singlehood (Loewenstein *et al.*, 1981; Baumbusch, 2004). These results echo Cagan's argument (2004) that being single does not mean a rejection of embracing an intimate relationship if this would come. 'Quirkyalone' is a concept put forward by Cagan (2004) to define this new increasing trend of single people who enjoy being single, accepting their relationship status while finding happiness, fulfilment and confidence within themselves. Quirkyalones value friendship highly, do not consider singleness as a social disease and are not antilove – they would cherish a romantic relationship if it comes. Quirkyalone is an organised grass-roots movement established by online communities who are also meeting offline at various meetings and events. The discussions on social media together with the offline meetings help empower and build connections among single people encouraging the idea that being single is not inferior to being in a relationship and being in a relationship is not always the definition of happiness. The emotional bonds created online and offline help to sustain this movement through the building of solidarity within those single and of social identity in order to support even the most marginalised ones. Hence, the satisfaction with being single is at the core of this movement which sheds positive light on being single in today's society where the ideology of being in a (married) relationship and having children is perpetuated as the key to having a fulfilled life (DePaulo and Morris, 2006; Budgeon, 2008). Single people can meet up and interact with other single people on Facebook pages such as 'The Community of Single People' created by social scholars who study the experiences of single people (DePaulo, 2019b). 'Single at heart' is a concept coined by DePaulo to express living 'the most meaningful and authentic life' as being happily single. DePaulo's a blog with the same name aims to shift the negative connotation about single people towards a more positive social representation of singlehood so as single people have a more collective sense of themselves.

It is possible that some of these singles by choice to be asexual (not having sexual attraction to a partner of either sex) (Bogaert, 2004; Brotto *et al.*, 2010). Recent research shows that some of the asexual individuals might also be aromantic (not having romantic attraction) or romantic (experiencing romantic attraction, creating emotional bond with a partner) (Van Houdenhove *et al.*, 2015). When applied to lifelong singles these distinctions suggest that some of them might have a significant other for whom they have romantic feelings but they have low frequency or no sexual intercourses at all (romantic asexuals). At the same time, some other lifelong singles may not be interested to have either sexual intercourses or to develop romantic feelings for someone (aromantic asexuals). Research shows that the ideal relationship among aromantic asexuals is

characterised as friendship-like (Scherrer, 2008) while romantic asexual individuals indicated an interest in sexual intimacy such as kissing or hugging while seeking more emotional intimacy (Dawson *et al.*, 2016). It may be that for some singles, emotional intimacy is fulfilled in the role of friends and family and these people might not need a partner.

The social networks and well-being of those single

In this paper, social network is used interchangeably with social support, both terms suggesting sources of support (emotional, economic, instrumental) and social integration (Chappell, 1991; Amati *et al.*, 2018). Valuing friends and family and receiving support from them are found to increase the satisfaction with life, happiness and self-rated health (Chopik, 2017; Nicolaisen and Thorsen, 2017; Amati *et al.*, 2018). First, social networks are important in affirming an individual's sense of self (Hartup and Stevens, 1997), satisfy the basic human need for belongingness and are a source of positive affirmation (Anthony and McCabe, 2015). For single people, friends can be a source of identity building, especially after termination a relationship (Budgeon, 2008). Secondly, the presence of social relationship contributes to an individual mental and physical health (Putnam 2000). For example, exercising or keeping a diet with a friend (Rackow *et al.*, 2015; Karfopoulou *et al.*, 2016) increases the chances of practising a continuously healthy lifestyle. Thirdly, social relationships form a resource pool for an individual. Friends can provide resources such as information, company (personal relationships, time spend together being involved in amusement activities, meals), emotional (love, advice and support about various problems) and instrumental support (economic help, helping with groceries, house-keeping) (Turner *et al.*, 1971; Törnblom and Fredholm, 1984; Gifford and Cave, 2012). In addition to the interaction with friends and family, interacting with people who are less emotionally close to us (weaker ties, such as coffee barista or yoga classmate) is shown to increase subjective well-being as well (Sandstrom and Dunn, 2014).

In their qualitative studies on singlehood, scholars have noted that friendships emerged as being more important compared to an intimate partner and are central to single's personal networks (Loewenstein *et al.*, 1981; Zajicek and Koski, 2003; Simpson, 2006; Budgeon, 2008). These studies confirm the results of the literature on the link between social networks and well-being, underlining that friends are a source of social and emotional support (Stein, 1975; Budgeon, 2008). The time spent with friends and the social activities where singles create interpersonal bonding with others are emotional investments for single people (Loewenstein *et al.*, 1971). Involvement in their own extended family or in that of their friends is a repeated aspect also in the lifestyle of the single (and childless) individuals at old ages (in Dublin area: Timonen and Doyle, 2013; in Israel: Band-Winterstein and Manchik-Rimon, 2014). Nonetheless, some studies underscore the social isolation among single women in mid and later life stages who are avoided by their partnered friends because the latter are afraid of mate poaching (Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003). Some other studies expressed the dissatisfaction of single women between 28-34 years old seeing their social circle

shirking by one of the friends marrying and spending less time with them (Sharp and Ganong, 2011). At the same time, family, some friends and co-workers have been identified as a source of stress for singles when they feel stigmatised. Research has noted that sometimes parents can favour the married sibling leaving the single one to feel displaced in their families or feeling invisible in the family (Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003; Sharp and Ganong, 2011).

Gender differences in the consequences of past relationships on well-being

The demographic literature on the gender differences of past relationships on well-being has mainly investigated the outcomes of divorce. The evidence shows that men compared to women experienced larger health declines and lower subjective well-being (US: Stack and Eshleman, 1998; Germany: Andreß and Bröckel, 2007; US: Shor *et al.*, 2012), greater feelings of loneliness and social isolation (in Netherlands: Dykstra and Fokkema, 2007), and larger increases in mortality following separation (Shor *et al.*, 2012). One explanation for these differences is that men benefit more from marriage than women in terms of health, social and emotional support. A second explanation is related to behavioural differences in the pre-divorce period. Studies show that women are more likely to initiate the divorce after they unsuccessfully tried to make their relationships work (Brinig and Allen, 2000; Kalmijn and Poortman, 2006). The decision to divorce might take men by surprise and they might become more distress when the marriage falls apart. In contrast, women who initiate divorce might already feel the relief of breaking-up from an unsatisfying relationship. These results suggest that men's and women's health and subjective-well-being may suffer on different time scales: women may suffer psychological distress during marriage and before the divorce whereas men suffer after the marriage terminates and possibly more intense.

Nonetheless, some other studies have suggested the opposite pattern (US: Simon and Marcussen, 1999) and others have found no gender differences (Norway: Mastekaasa, 1994; Canada: Strohschein *et al.*, 2005; US: Amato and Hohmann-Marriott, 2007; Germany: Leopold, 2018). Recent evidence from Germany explains that the gender differences in life satisfaction disappear after a couple of years after divorce, suggesting that the adverse effect of divorce on men's life satisfaction is short-lived (Leopold, 2018). The psychological literature which investigated the effects of a break-up from a LAT relationship offers mixed evidence as well. Some American studies show that women experience more positive emotions than men after a break-up (Sprecher, 1994; Choo *et al.*, 1996; Sprecher *et al.*, 1998) but other evidence underlines the opposite (Mearns, 1991; Perilloux and Buss, 2008). Given the contradicting results of the literature no gender differences are specifically hypnotized in this chapter.

Drawing from the gaps in literature on singlehood, this paper asks:

1) Are there any differences in the mean satisfaction with being single between the lifelong singles and those who either had a past intimate coresidential or LAT relationship, net of other control variables?

2) How are the satisfaction and frequency with social networks of those unpartnered in mid-thirties associated with satisfaction with being single, net of past intimate relationship(s) and other control variables?

3) Is gender moderating the association between past intimate relationships on satisfaction with being single?

Data and methods

Data and analytical sample

The data are taken from wave 1 (collected in 2008/2009) of the German Family Panel pairfam (Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics), release 9.1 (Brüderl *et al.*, 2018a), a nationwide random sample of German respondents born in 1971-1973, 1981-1983 and 1991-1993. The survey began in 2008 with a representative sample of 12,403 focal participants (referred to as anchors) who are followed annually. Pairfam is an ongoing multi-disciplinary, longitudinal study focused on intimate unions, parenthood and family development.

In Wave 1 (2008/2009) there are 695 unpartnered individuals in the birth cohort 1971-1973. Due to about 1% of non-responses in both the dependent and some independent variables, the analytical sample drops to 684 unpartnered individuals. These unpartnered people are aged between 35 and 38 years old. In this paper lifelong singlehood refers to those aged 35-38 years who never experienced any important intimate relationship. Pairfam asks the respondents to reflect on all the past important relationships to them since they were 14 years old. An important relationship is defined as a relationship that lasted longer than 6 months, or that in which the respondent lived with their partner, or that which led to the birth of a child, or that which was important for the respondent for other reasons. Based on these relationship histories, I derived a variable labelled as 'past intimate relationships(s)'. Parifam allows a researcher to distinguish those who had only past LAT relationships and those who never had any intimate past relationship. By distinguishing a LAT relationship from a coresidential relationship is important because LAT relationships are different than coresidential relationships: the first are considered a stage in union development, especially among the never married, are shorter and involve little committed compared to coresidential relationships (Régnier-Loilier, 2016; van der Wiel *et al.*, 2018).

The analytical sample is aged between 35-38 years old and the definition of lifelong singlehood does not match the exact age composition in the definition of lifelong singlehood in demography (i.e. study those who never had a coresidential relationship by the age of 40). It is possible that a few of them who had not yet had an intimate relationship might have one by the age of 40. However, I consider that most people will have had an intimate relationship by the age 35.

Therefore, I do not think there will be many differences in the composition of past intimate relationships between someone aged 35, the youngest age in my sample, and someone aged 40. It is important to note that the sample contains unpartnered individuals who would prefer an opposite-sex partner (632), a same-sex partner (24), who are unsure about the sex of their prospective partner (15) and who do not want to answer (13). As the preferred sex of a prospective partner may not define sexual orientation I included everyone in the sample of the unpartnered. As Pairfam does not have a variable measuring the sexual orientation identity of the respondents, I consider those who do not know, do not answer or those who would prefer a same-sex partner as broadly non-heterosexuals rather than homosexuals.

I run ordinary least square regression models (OLS) on satisfaction with being single.

Dependent variable

The dependent variable in this study is satisfaction with being single. The term satisfaction with being single is used interchangeably with the terms satisfaction with relationship status and subjective well-being. Subjective well-being is a general construct which encompasses the affective and cognitive evaluation of life (Diener *et al.*, 1999). Satisfaction with being single is one indicator of the subjective well-being that indicates how people feel with their relationship status as being single.

This variable is operationalized in parifam by asking those unpartnered: 'You stated that you are not in a relationship at the moment. How satisfied are you with your situation as single?'. The variable is measured on an 11-point scale, where 0 is 'Very dissatisfied' and 10 'Very satisfied'. Out of the initial sample of 695 unpartnered people in wave 1, 1.3% of the sample did not want to answer or did not know what their satisfaction with being single is (9 item non-responses). These item non-responses are deleted.

Independent variables

Past intimate relationships

The main independent variable is past intimate relationship(s) with categories: no past intimate relationship, past LAT relationships, past coresidential relationships and no information about past relationship(s). Those with no past intimate relationship are the lifelong singles. The past LAT relationship refers to those past relationships with a LAT partner only. The past coresidential relationships refer to those relationships with a coresident partner. Those who provided no information about past intimate relationships did not want to mention the name or sex of any past intimate partners. It may be that these people are shy and did not want to acknowledge that they had no intimate relationship at all. It may also be that they had only short-lived sexual relationships that could not be minimized as experience by assigning them in the category 'no past intimate

relationship' but neither in the category 'past LAT relationships' since those partners might not have been important enough to be considered as dating partners.

Social networks

Social networks are measured as satisfaction with friends and social contacts, and the frequency of contacting biological parents. Respondents had to rate on a scale from 0 (Very dissatisfied) to 10 (Very satisfied) how satisfied are they with different domains in life. Satisfaction with friends and social contacts was one of them.

The frequency of contacting biological parents is a variable composed of two other variables: frequency of contacting biological mother and frequency of contacting biological father. Pairfam asks the respondents 'And how often are you in contact with your biological mother, adding up all visits, letters, phone calls, etc.' The same question is asked for a biological dad.

I intersected these two variables to create one single variable measuring the frequency of contacting biological parents with the following categories 'At least once per week', 'At least once a month', Several times per year or never', and 'Both parents died'. There was only 1 person who refused to answer ('No answer') at both variables measuring frequency of contacting biological mother and father and this person was deleted from the initial sample of those unpartnered (695 unpartnered individuals).

Control variables

Among the control variables, I included gender, educational attainment, employment status, religiosity, household composition, self-rated health status and country of birth. These variables have been used in investigating the correlates of lifelong singlehood in the existent demographic studies (Bellani *et al.*, 2017; Dykstra and Poortman, 2010; Wiik and Dommermuth, 2014) and in studies which looked at the effect of divorce and subjective well-being (Booth and Amato, 1991; Dush and Amato, 2005).

The education variable is based on the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED 97) and is divided into 3 categories. The category "low education" includes all respondents who have no or lower secondary school degrees, "medium education" refers to upper secondary and post-secondary (but non-tertiary) education. Those in the "high education" category had a university or college degree or had earned a doctorate. Rather than deleting those with incomplete data at education (6 people which signifies 0.9% from the sample) I assigned them into having at least low educational attainment not to reduce further the sample size.

The employment status is a dummy variable indicating if the respondent is employed. The household composition has the categories a) living alone b) living with parents or with others (other

relatives or siblings, friends, housemates) c) living with children only d) not clear with whom but not alone. Because a few of these unpartnered people live with siblings, friends or housemates only I collapsed this category with living with parents or other relatives. The aim of including this variable is to test the differences in the satisfaction with being single between those living alone and those living with parents (or others) or those living with children. Self-rated health during the past 4 weeks reads in pairfam 'How would you describe your health status during the past 4 weeks?' and it is measured on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 'Bad' 2 'Not so good' 3 'Satisfactory' 4'Good to 5 'Very good'. I collapsed the first two categories into one category indicating 'poor' health and the last two categories into one indicating 'good' health. Therefore, the self-rated health has 3 categories, poor, satisfactory and good. The country of birth of the respondent is included to control for the potential differences in satisfaction with being single between those born in The Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) and in the German Democratic Republic (East Germany). The cohorts born after 1950 have a different family behaviour pattern in the two parts of the country (Kreyenfeld and Konietzka, 2017) due to different socio-political regimes that vehiculated distinct family values. The variable has the categories 'East Germany' 'West Germany' and 'Other' being a proxy also for ethnicity as people born in another country are likely to be immigrants.

Model building strategy involves 3 main steps: Model 1 contains only the effect of the past intimate relationships and the control variables, Model 2 adds to Model 1 the satisfaction with friends and social contacts, Model 3 adds to Model 2 the frequency of contacting the biological parents. Model 3 is the full model where all the main independent variables and the controls are added. Model 4 contains an additional interaction effect between past intimate relationship and gender. Despite that the overall effect is not statistically significant the model, the results are shown as this Model 4 answers to one of the main research questions of this chapter.

Results

Descriptive results

Table 1 below shows the distribution of satisfaction with being single, past intimate relationship(s), social network and control variables among those unpartnered in the birth cohort 1971-1973 at the moment of the interview (wave 1). The distribution is shown for the full sample as well as within each gender. Weighted percentages and means, as well as unweighted cases, are presented. Table 3 in Appendix shows the distribution of both satisfaction with being single and social networks by past intimate relationship(s). Table 4 in Appendix shows the distribution of the demographic and socio-economic control variables by past intimate relationship(s).

[Table 1 about here]

We see that most of those unpartnered aged 35-38 have a past coresidential relationship (46.7%), followed by those who had a past LAT relationship (27.6%). The lifelong single composes 18.5% of the sample. This indicates that the lifelong singles are not a negligible proportion. The mean of the satisfaction with being single is 6.01, suggesting a rather medium satisfaction. Among the social network variables, the mean of satisfaction with friends and social contacts is 7.37. Most of the sample contact their parents at least once a week (79.2%). This points to the fact that the unpartnered in their mid-thirties benefit from a rather good quality and frequent social support. Most of the unpartnered people have medium education (57.4%, are employed (72.6%), without religious background (64.4%), live alone (63.6%), their self-rated health in the past 4 weeks has been good (59%), and were born in East Germany (70.8%).

In terms of gender, it is interesting to note that more males than females who are unpartnered are lifelong single (26.4% vs 8.1%) and had a LAT relationship only (30% vs. 24.4%). However, more unpartnered females than males had a coresidential relationship (61.5 % vs 35.4%). This result is in line with Raab and Struffolino's (2019) study on the relationship trajectories to childlessness in Germany. They show that childless men are more likely than women to be in the single cluster until the age of 40 (especially if high educated) while women were more often married.

Looking at Table 3 and 4 from Appendix, the highest mean for the satisfaction with being single variable is among those who did not provide information about past intimate relationships (6.61) and among those lifelong single (6.24), followed by those who had LAT relationships (5.96) and those with past coresidential relationships (5.86). This already suggests that the lifelong singles are not miserable. The highest mean of satisfaction with friends and social contacts is among those who did not provide information about past intimate relationships (7.86), followed by those who had only LAT relationships (7.50) and those who had past coresidential relationships (7.50). The lowest mean of satisfaction with friends and social contacts is among lifelong singles (6.98). Most respondents within each past intimate relationship(s) category contact their biological parents at least once a week. Among lifelong singles and those who had past LAT relationships there are more males than females (lifelong singlehood: 81.1% vs. 18.9%, for past LAT relationships: 61.8% vs. 38.2%). Among those with past coresidential relationships there are more females than males (56.9% vs. 43.1%). Also, more males than females do not provide information about past intimate relationships (64% vs. 36%). Among lifelong single, most of them have medium educational attainment, are employed, have no religious background, live alone and have good health and are born in East Germany.

Multivariate results

Table 2 presents the OLS regression models on satisfaction with being single. The results are presented as unstandardized coefficients. Model 1 has only the past intimate relationship(s). Model 2 adds to model 1 satisfaction with friends and social contacts, and Model 3 adds to Model 2 the frequency of contacting biological parents and it is the full model. For the full model, I tested if the effect of past intimate relationship(s) on satisfaction with being single differs by gender via an interaction effect between past intimate relationship and gender. These results are presented in Model 4.

[Table 2 about here]

Considering Model 1, which includes only past intimate relationship(s) and the covariates, there is no significant association between past intimate relationship(s) and satisfaction with being single. Unpartnered females compared their counterpart males are more likely to be satisfied with being single. The unpartnered with poor or satisfactory self-rated health are less likely to be satisfied with being single compared to those with good self-rated health. People born in another country than East Germany are more likely to be less satisfied with being single. As this variable is a broad proxy for immigration status the result may be related to the difficulties to find a partner in mid-thirties for those with a different ethnic background.

Model 2 adds to Model 1 satisfaction with friends. Controlling for friends, the difference between those who had either a LAT or coresidential relationship and the lifelong singles becomes significant. Firstly, those who had the experience of an intimate relationship relative to the lifelong singles are less likely to be satisfied being single. Secondly, as more satisfied unpartnered people are with their friends as more satisfied they are with being single. Thirdly, even if the coefficients between Model 1 and 2 do not change much, there appears to be a suppressor effect[1] of this third variable, satisfaction with being single on past intimate relationship(s). This suggests on one hand, that people who are satisfied with their friends are more satisfied with being single (seen in the bivariate relationship in Table 5, Appendix and in Model 2). On the other hand, those who had past intimate relationships are generally more satisfied with their friends compared to lifelong singles (this is seen in the bivariate relationship shown in Appendix, Table 3). This, in turn, explains why

[1] '(…) a situation in which the magnitude of the relationship between an independent variable and a dependent variable becomes larger when a third variable is included indicate suppression' (MacKinnon *et al.*, 2000, p. 3)

having controlled for satisfaction with friends, the past coresidential and LAT relationships have a stronger effect on satisfaction with being single. The results suggest that lifelong singles might be a select group of people who, on one hand, might be shy or introvert having a hard time making friends or, on the other hand, are not that happy with the quality of their friends, and this, may hint at the composition of their friends. For example, they might have more married friends.

In Model 2, gender is still an important indicator of satisfaction with being single, with females being more satisfied with their relationship status than men. The statistically significant difference between a poor and good self-rated health disappears, leaving those with a satisfactory health less satisfied with being single compared to those with good health. This model shows that past intimate relationships and satisfaction with friends are important indicators in explaining satisfaction with being single.

Model 3 adds to Model 2 the frequency of contacting parents, as the last social network variable. This is the full model on which conclusions and discussion are formed. In this model, those with a past LAT or coresidential relationship compared to those lifelong singles are still less likely to be satisfied with being single. There are no big differences between Model 2 and Model 3 with respect to the size, direction and significance of the coefficients. Satisfaction with friends remains an important indicator in the association with satisfaction with being single. Contacting parents at least once a month compared to at least once a week is associated with increased satisfaction with being single. Contacting parents less frequently, such as several times per year or never compared to at least once a week decreases satisfaction with being single. Even if this last difference is not statistically significant, this variable shows that overall being in contact with parents is important for how the unpartnered assess their satisfaction with being single. Among control variables, females are more likely to be satisfied being single than men. Those with high educational attainment are less satisfied with being single compared to those with low educational attainment. It could be that these high educated singles have the socio-economic resources to live a happy life, affording to travel and engage various social activities, but they are unsatisfied of doing them without a partner. Having a satisfactory self-rated health compared to a good self-rated health and being born in another country compared to East Germany are associated with less satisfaction of being single.

Model 4 shows the interaction effect between gender and past intimate relationship(s) on satisfaction with being single. The model shows that there are no statistically significant differences between the past intimate relationship(s) of males and females and satisfaction with being single. However, males with a past LAT or coresidential relationship relative to those lifelong singles are less satisfied with being single. In other words, for men, but not for women, being a lifelong single

suggests they are more satisfied with remaining single. It may be that the lifelong single men do not need a partner since they have accumulated during their adulthood the economic, social and emotional resources that a partner had brought to those ever partnered. Because the ever partnered had experienced these pooled resources they might miss these benefits an intimate relationship once offered, and, as a result, are more dissatisfied being single. Nonetheless, this result must be interpreted with caution since the overall Wald test for the interaction effect is not significant, suggesting that the effect of past intimate relationship(s) on satisfaction with being single does not differ by gender.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study analysed how past intimate relationship(s) and social networks of those single in mid-thirties are associated with satisfaction with being single. The contributions of this study to the literature on singlehood are that a) it defines singlehood and lifelong singlehood in terms of present or past intimate relationship(s) based on unique data b) moving beyond the simple marital status providing a more nuanced picture on the link between past intimate relationships and satisfaction with being single. Additionally, it c) employs an interdisciplinary approach to explain, on one hand, the differences in satisfaction with being single between the lifelong singles and singles who had ever past intimate relationship and, on the other hand, how social networks of these unpartnered individuals are related to satisfaction with being single. Theories and concepts from sociology and psychology are used to interpret the results.

Those without any past intimate relationship and those with past LAT relationships have been overlooked in the existing research which grouped them together with those with past coresidential relationships to inaccurately define 'lifelong singlehood' (Bellani *et al.*, 2017). Using rich data from the Germany Family Panel (pairfam) on intimate relationship histories, this is the first study which defines and identifies the lifelong singlehood as those single without any past intimate relationship. Moreover, this study distinguishes those single with past LAT relationships from those with coresidential relationships offering a more detailed picture of the role of different relationship types on satisfaction with being single. Additionally, to the best of my knowledge, this is the first study which defines being single as being unpartnered. Other studies defined 'singlehood' as not being in a coresidential relationship, never married, living without a partner or living alone, capturing individuals who might actually have a LAT partner. The results show that lifelong singles do not feel miserable despite the stereotype vehiculating in the society that never married singles are sad, cold, less warm than those partnered (DePaulo and Morris, 2006; Hertel *et al.*, 2007; Greitemeyer, 2009), the social stigma attached to singlehood (Zajicek and Koski, 2003; Sharp and Ganong, 2011), which can take even a legal form (Morris *et al.*, 2008 DePaulo and Morris, 2006; DePaulo and Morris, 2005a).

Firstly, most of the Germans unpartnered between 35-38 years old had past coresidential relationships, followed by those who had past LAT relationships only, and those who are lifelong singles. This suggests that while most of these adults had experienced an intimate relationship (46.7%), the proportion of lifelong singles is not negligible either, 18.5% of the singles having no past intimate relationship experience. The mean of satisfaction with being single among these singles is neither small nor high (6.01). Among social network variables, the mean with satisfaction with friends and social contacts is fairly high (7.37) with most of these unpartnered contact their biological parents once a week. This indicates an overall strong social network. Slightly more women than men are single. These single in mid-thirties have good socio-economic conditions, most of them having at least medium education and are employed. It is important to note that more men than women are lifelong single and a high proportion of these lifelong singles are medium and high educated. This suggests that lifelong singlehood might be a more select group of men high educated. More women than men had past coresidential experiences. This result is in line with Raab and Struffolino's (2019) study on the relationship trajectories to childlessness in Germany. They show that childless men are more likely than women to be in the single cluster until the age of 40, especially if high educated while women were more often married.

Secondly, the results show that those with past coresidential or LAT relationships are more dissatisfied with being single compared to lifelong singles, net of all covariates. This result is consistent with the strain/crisis theoretical framework which explains the adverse implications of a break-up on the (newly) singles' well-being compared to those continuously married (Booth and Amato, 1991; Verbakel, 2012). By setting the benchmark to lifelong singlehood, this study suggests that the strain/crisis model can also be applied to explain the lower satisfaction with being single of those who had a past intimate relationship. Therefore, this study adds to those underlining the sadness, stress and anger people feel when losing a spouse, a cohabiting or LAT partner (Mastekaasa, 1994; Sprecher *et al.*, 1998; Sbarra and Emery, 2005; Rhoades *et al.*, 2011). It may be that once people had experienced the pooled material and non-material resources with a partner, which are associated with increased levels of well-being, they want to have that again. For example, having experienced a pooled income to pay rent, the sexual and emotional intimacy with a partner or having accessed a larger social network via a partner's friends, might create the need to have that in a new relationship. At the same time, this research points at the importance of a LAT relationship break-up on one's well-being. This result is in line with the psychological research underlining the negative feelings people experience when breaking-up from a LAT partner, such as feeling sad, lost, scared, experiencing low self-esteem and rumination (Perilloux and Buss, 2008; Sprecher, 1994; Sprecher *et al.*, 1998). Lifelong singles, on the other hand, have not experienced any relationship break-up, and the emotional turmoil or stress associated with it, reason why they might assess their singlehood as more satisfying than the those ever partnered.

Thirdly, this study also offers evidence that from a life course standpoint the event of losing a partner and the transitions from being in a relationship to being single are painful experiences. Since transitions change slowly one's life course trajectory (Elder, 1994), people might have difficulties accepting their new relationship status as single and might have a hard time of 'letting go' of a partner (Mearns, 1991; Belu *et al*., 2016). The event of a break-up causes an abrupt change in one's life course trajectory (Elder, 1994). Psychologists discuss about how a break-up produces changes in the structure of individuals' self-concept (Aron *et al.*, 1997; Slotter *et al.*, 2010). Because in a relationship people define aspects of the self through an ex- romantic partner, a break-up leaves individuals with feeling incomplete and confused about whom they are in the absence of a partner. This reduced self-concept clarity is associated with emotional disorder (Slotter *et al.*, 2010). The loss of the resources once shared with a partner and the change in the self-concept from 'we' to 'I' might be underlining mechanisms leading to a high dissatisfaction with being single among the ever partnered.

Fourthly, this study suggests that lifelong singles might be a selected group of people, who might be more self-reliant, self-sufficient and independent compared to those with past intimate relationships. In terms of sexual orientation identity, they can even be asexual and might not need sexual intimacy with a partner (Bogaert, 2004; Brotto *et al.*, 2010). Recent research points to a category of asexual individuals who are also aromatic, suggesting that this people develop neither sexual attraction nor emotional attraction to a partner of either sex, finding emotional fulfilment just in friends and family (Van Houdenhove *et al.*, 2015). The higher satisfaction with being single among lifelong singles compared to those who had intimate relationships might suggest that these individuals have chosen to stay single. The qualitative literature points that individuals who have chosen singlehood evaluated being in a relationship as too restrictive for them (Timonen and Doyle, 2013; Byrne, 2003; Budgeon, 2008). Benefits such as freedom to organise one's personal schedule and finances, to pursue higher education and future career goals, to build friendships with whom they want, and not compromising to a partner were reasons of not choosing to be in a relationship. The higher satisfaction of being single compared to that of those ever partner might also result from a process of rationalization, where lifelong singles accepted their singlehood and learnt to focus on the independence and benefits the single lifestyle brings (Dalton, 1992; Davies, 2003; Band-Winterstein and Manchik-Rimon, 2014). Nonetheless, high proportion of the lifelong singles are medium and high educated suggesting that these people have accumulated resources that facilitate a single lifestyle, such as autonomy, self-reliance, economic independence.

At the same time, the results suggest that lifelong single might be a more selected group in terms of personality traits compared to those who had intimate relationships. The lifelong singles have the lowest mean of satisfaction with friends and social contacts compared to those who had intimate relationships and they appear to be less socially integrated compared to those who had

an intimate relationship. Firstly, it may be that these people are more introverts or shy and face difficulties in marking or keeping friends. This is suggested by the suppressor effect of satisfaction with friends and social contacts on satisfaction with being single via past intimate relationships. Secondly, these people are past an age when most people have started to marry according to the mean age of marriage in Germany at the moment of the interview (30 years for females and 33 years for males in 2008 (UNECE Statistical Database, 2019). It may be that these lifelong singles have started to 'lose' their single friends whom once they married spend less time with them (Sharp and Ganong, 2011) and evaluate satisfaction with friends as low. A low satisfaction with friends and social contact might also suggest that these lifelong singles are isolated from their partnered friends, who are afraid of mate poaching, perhaps thinking that their lifelong single friend is 'desperate' to be in a relationship (Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003).

Fifth, this study underlines the importance of friends and social contacts on one hand, and of the family on the other hand for single's well-being. The fact that a higher satisfaction with friends and social contact is associated with a higher satisfaction of being single mirrors the discussion from the qualitative studies about friends providing basic satisfactions of emotional intimacy in single's life, fulfilling their emotional need to belong (Budgeon, 2008). Spending time with friends and doing activities together are not only emotional investments for singles (Loewenstein *et. al.*, 1971, Budgeon, 2008), but also sources of creating fulfilled and meaningful lives (Timonen and Doyle, 2013; Band-Winterstein and Manchik-Rimon, 2014). Friends help single people not to feel marginalised in a world where personal fulfilment is defined as having a long-term relationship with an intimate partner (DePaulo and Morris, 2005a). Studies have underlined the personal growth and fulfilment the singles experience as they attend group meetings (Stein, 1975) and are involved in various social activities with friends (Loewenstein *et. al.*, 1971). Additionally, being in contact with family increases satisfaction with being single. However, higher levels of satisfaction with being single are associated with contacting biological parents once a month relative to once a week. This may indicate a certain distance that singles keep from parents. It may be that as they age biological parents pressure their single adult children to (re)partner (Sharp and Ganong, 2011). It may also be that biological parents favour the married sibling as they proved that they 'have grown up' leaving the single sibling to feel 'invisible' (Byrne, 2003). The social pressure to marry and parents' discriminative behaviour towards the single adult child may be reasons to contact family less frequent and this, in turn, to keep high the satisfaction with being single.

Lastly, this study shows no gender differences on satisfaction with being single by past intimate relationships. This result is opposing those which present men as having a lower well-being than women after separation (Andreß and Bröckel, 2007; Dykstra and Fokkema, 2007; Shor *et al.*, 2012). This study is more in line a more recent research conducted in Germany showing no gender differences by marital status on subjective well-being (Leopold, 2018). It is interesting to note

however that men with past intimate relationships are more dissatisfied being single than those lifelong single. These results may suggest that for men losing a partner is detrimental to their well-being pointing at the same time to the benefits an intimate partner has for men's life. In contrast to the lifelong single men who might have accumulated material and non-material resources during their adulthood and do not need a partner, the ever partnered might miss the pooled resources an intimate relationship once offered, and, as a result, are more dissatisfied being single. Nonetheless, this result should be interpreted with caution. Future research could replicate this result on a larger sample.

All in all, this study points to the fact that lifelong singles are not miserable. Beyond all the potential interpretations it may be that social media has a role the lifelong singles feeling satisfied with their relationship status. Sociologists emphasise that in order for people to make sense of their lives and create definitions of the self they must use concepts that are culturally shared (Gubruim and Holstein, 1995). Online communities who organise grass-root movements to promote singlehood as a positive identity, such as quirkyalone, may have started to change people's mindsets by stripping off the social stigma attached to singlehood. Single people who do not see singlehood as a social disease and decided to stay single until they meet the right person while enjoying their friends do have a quirkyalone community. Those who live 'the most meaningful and authentic life' as being single and perhaps willing to remain single find a sense of community by joining Facebook pages such as The Community of Single People or by signing up on the blog Single at Heart created by Bella de Paulo, a social scientist who is researching singles lifestyles. These online communities give a sense of empowerment and identity to those unpartnered who have been single either by choice or circumstance encouraging them at the same time to embrace their singlehood and find fulfilment within themselves.

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Tables

Table 1 Characteristics of those unpartnered in mid-thirties at the moment of the interview. Weighted percentages or means (standard errors) and unweighted cases

Variables	Male		Female		Full sample	
	Weighted % or mean (SE)	**Unweighted N**	**Weighted % or mean (SE)**	**Unweighted N**	**Weighted % or mean (SE)**	**Unweighted N**
Past intimate relationship(s)						
Lifelong singlehood	***26.4***	***81***	***8.1***	***26***	18.5	107
Past relationship with a LAT partner	***30.0***	***91***	***24.4***	***69***	27.6	160
Past relationship with a coresident partner	***35.4***	***136***	***61.5***	***238***	46.7	374
No information about past relationship(s)	***8.1***	***20***	***6***	***23***	7.2	43
Satisfaction with being single	5.92 (0.51)		6.13 (0.16)		6.01 (0.11)	
Satisfaction with friends, social contacts	7.22 (0.16)		7.57 (0.15)		7.37 (0.11)	
Frequency of contacting biological parents						
Both parents died	4.5	16	3.1	12	3.9	28
At least once a week	80.1	265	78	274	79.2	539
At least once a month	9.3	26	8.2	27	8.8	53
Several times per year or never	6.1	24	10.7	40	8.1	64
Educational attainment						
Low	8.7	35	11.5	53	9.9	88
Medium	58.4	209	56.1	208	57.4	417
High	32.9	87	32.4	92	32.7	179
Labour force status						
Employed	77.2	251	66.5	219	72.6	470

Variables	Male		Female		Full sample	
	Weighted % or mean (SE)	Unweighted N	Weighted % or mean (SE)	Unweighted N	Weighted % or mean (SE)	Unweighted N
Not in labour force	10.0	33	18.8	80	13.8	113
Unemployed	12.8	47	14.7	54	13.6	101
Religiosity						
Without religious background	63.1	203	66.2	222	64.4	425
With religious background	36.9	128	33.8	131	35.6	259
Household composition						
Living alone	***75.6***	***236***	***47.7***	***116***	63.6	352
Parents or others (relatives, siblings, friends, housemates, children could live as well)	***19.7***	***73***	***12.2***	***32***	16.4	105
Children only	***3.8***	***18***	***33.3***	***168***	16.6	186
Not clear with whom, but not alone	***0.9***	***4***	***6.8***	***37***	3.4	41
Self-rated health in the past 4 weeks						
Poor	***14.2***	***53***	***19.8***	***74***	16.7	127
Satisfactory	***21.3***	***74***	***28.4***	***98***	24.4	172
Good	***64.4***	***204***	***51.8***	***181***	59	385
Country of birth						
East Germany	72.5	225	68.6	216	70.8	441
West Germany	16.6	75	18.6	77	17.4	152
Other	10.9	31	12.9	60	11.7	91
Total	100	331	100	353	100	684

Notes: pairfam, own calculations; SE- standard error; N- number of cases; italic and bolded numbers indicate that the specific variable is associated with gender at 5% significance level (according to a χ^2 test of association).

Table 2 Linear regression on satisfaction with being single

	Satisfaction with being single			
	M1	**M2**	**M3**	**M4**
Variables	**Unstand. Coeff**	**Unstand. Coeff**	**Unstand. Coeff**	**Unstand. Coeff**
Past intimate relationship(s) (ref. No past intimate relationship)				
Past LAT relationship	-0.43	-0.55+	-0.55+	-0.86*
Past coresidential relationship	-0.52	-0.63*	-0.61+	-0.71+
No information provided about past relationship(s)	0.35	0.08	0.12	-0.10
Satisfaction with friends and social contacts		0.24***	0.25***	0.25***
Frequency of contacting biological parents (ref. At least once a week)				
Both parents died			0.04	0.04
At least once a month			0.62*	0.69*
Several times per year or never			-0.10	-0.11
Gender (ref. Male)				
Female	0.57*	0.42+	0.42+	-0.34
Educational attainment (ref. Low)				
Medium	-0.11	-0.21	-0.25	-0.26
High	-0.50	-0.60	-0.67+	-0.69+
Labour force status (ref. Employed)				
Not employed	-0.26	-0.08	-0.08	-0.08
Religiosity (ref. Without religious background)				
With religious background	0.08	0.16	0.15	0.17
Household composition (ref. Living alone)				
Parents and/or others	-0.05	-0.05	-0.04	-0.05
Children only	-0.44	-0.36	-0.34	-0.32
Not clear with whom, but not alone	0.30	0.57	0.54	0.53
Health status (ref. At least good)				
Poor	-0.61*	-0.38	-0.44	-0.44
Satisfactory	-0.75**	-0.57*	-0.56*	-0.56*
Country of birth (ref. East Germany)				
West Germany	-0.29	-0.46	-0.47	-0.52+
Other	-0.66*	-0.51	-0.52+	-0.55+
Interaction effect between past intimate relationship and gender				
Past relationship, with a LAT partner x Female				1.19
Past relationship, with a coresident partner x Female				0.67
No information provided about past relationship(s) x Female				0.97
Constant	6.84***	5.17***	5.12***	5.26***
N	684	684	684	684

	Satisfaction with being single			
	M1	**M2**	**M3**	**M4**
Variables	**Unstand. Coeff**	**Unstand. Coeff**	**Unstand. Coeff**	**Unstand. Coeff**
p value from Wald test	-	0.000	0.239	0.497
R^2	0.05	0.10	0.10	0.11

Notes: pairfam, own computations; unstand. coeff – unstandardized coefficients; N – number of cases; + 0.10 * 0.05 ** 0.01 *** 0.001

Appendix

Table 3 below shows the distribution of both satisfaction with being single and social networks by past intimate relationship(s). Table 4 shows the distribution of the demographic and socio-economic control variables by past intimate relationship(s).

By looking at Table 3 and 4 I investigate a) how do the distribution of both satisfaction with being single and social networks and b) the other socio-economic control variables differ among those lifelong single, those who had only past LAT relationship(s), and those who had past coresidential relationship(s).

Table 3 The distribution of the main variables of interest by past intimate relationship(s). Weighted means (standard errors) and weighted percentages

Main variables of interest	**Past intimate relationship(s)**			
	Lifelong singlehood	**Past LAT relationship**	**Past coresidential relationship**	**No information provided about past intimate relationships**
Satisfaction with being single	6.24 (0.27)	5.96 (0.21)	5.86 (0.15)	6.61 (0.47)
Satisfaction with friends	6.98 (0 24)	7.50 (0.23)	7.37 (0.16)	7.86 (0.34)
Frequency of contacting biological parents				
Both parents died	3.3	3.4	4.1	5.8
At least once a week	82.1	78	78.7	80
At least once a month	10.1	11.2	7.5	4.8
Several times per year or never	4.5	7.4	9.7	9.4
Total (weighted) %	100	100	100	100
Total (unweighted N)	107	160	374	43

Notes: pairfam, own calculations; SE- standard error; N- number of cases; italic and bolded numbers indicate that the specific variable is associated with gender at 5% significance level (according to a χ^2 test of association).

Table 4 The distribution of the control variables by past intimate relationships

Control variables	Past intimate relationship(s)			
	Lifelong singlehood	**Past LAT relationship**	**Past coresidential relationship**	**No information provided about past intimate relationships**
Gender				
Male	***81.1***	***61.8***	***43.1***	***64***
Female	***18.9***	***38.2***	***56.9***	***36***
Educational attainment				
Low	8.9	6.2	12.3	11.8
Medium	51	58.7	59.1	57.6
High	40.1	35.1	28.7	30.6
Labour force status				
Not employed	16.8	21.3	23.9	35.2
Employed	83.2	78.7	76.1	64.8
Religiosity				
Without religious background	69.3	66.5	61	66
With religious background	30.7	33.5	39	34
Household composition				
Living alone	***72.5***	***73.3***	***54.7***	***60.7***
Parents or others (relatives, siblings, friends, housemates, children could live as well)	***23.8***	***19.5***	***11.6***	***17.2***
Children only	***3.7***	***4.9***	***28.5***	***17.3***
Not clear with whom, but not alone	***0***	***2.3***	***5.3***	***4.8***
Self-rated health in the past 4 weeks				
Poor	***5.9***	***15***	***22.3***	***14***
Satisfactory	***30.3***	***25.3***	***21.3***	***25.4***
Good	***63.8***	***59.6***	***56.4***	***60.6***
Country of birth				
East Germany	68.7	77.9	68.2	65.5
West Germany	19.2	14.6	18.1	19.3
Other	12	7.5	13.6	15.3
Total (weighted) %	100	100	100	100
Total (unweighted N)	107	160	374	43

Notes: pairfam, own calculations; SE- standard error; N- number of cases; italic and bolded numbers indicate that the specific variable is associated with past intimate relationship(s) at 5% significance level (according to a χ^2 test of association).

Table 5 The means and standard errors of satisfaction with friends and social contacts over past intimate relationship(s) among those unpartnered

	Summary of satisfaction with friends and social contacts				
Past intimate relationship(s)	**Mean**	**Standard error**	**Min**	**Max**	**N**
Lifelong singlehood	6.98	0.25	0	10	107
Past LAT relationship	7.50	0.23	0	10	160
Past coresidential relationship	7.38	0.16	0	10	374
No information about past intimate relationship	7.86	0.35	0	10	43
Total	7.37	0.11	0	10	684