Living Alone in Mid-Life: Diversity and Change

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Background: trend in living alone

FIGURE 1. Trend in the proportion living alone in Great Britain between 1985 and 2008 (16-75+)

Background: trend in living alone

FIGURE 2. Trend in the proportion living alone in Great Britain between 1985 and 2008 (35-64)

Motivation for the study

- Little attention for mid-life living arrangements; most studies have focussed on changes in living arrangements during young adulthood and later life.

- Previous research on living alone in mid-life has looked at:
  - the effect of rising income on the propensity to live alone (e.g. Pampel 1983);
  - transitions into and out of living alone (e.g. Chandler et al. 2004);
  - the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of those living alone and how these have changed over time (e.g. Hall and Ogden 2003).

- … But little attention for different partnership and parenthood trajectories into living alone in mid-life.
Why is this important?

• The absolute and relative size of the population living alone in mid-life has increased over time.

• The middle-aged population living alone has probably become more heterogeneous over time.

• Socio-economic and kin resources are strongly related to several aspects in later life, such as living arrangements in old age, health, loneliness, demand for formal support, demand for certain types of (formal) support, etc.
Research questions

1. What are the partnership trajectories into living alone in mid-life? What proportion has never partnered, ever partnered and ever re-partnered?

2. What proportion has children?

3. Can different types of middle-aged people living alone be empirically distinguished?
Pathways into living alone in mid-life

- Never had a co-residential partnership:
  - Delay of partnership formation
  - Persistent singlehood / “spinsters”
  - Empty-nest single parent
  - Non-residential parent

- Childless

- Parents

- Ever had a co-residential partnership:
  - Partnership dissolution - separation or divorce
  - Partnership dissolution - death of a partner
  - Empty-nest single parent
  - Non-residential parent

- Childless

- Parents
Data: Understanding Society (USoc)

- USoc is a panel study on private households in the United Kingdom.
- First wave of USoc (collected between January 2009 and January 2011).
- Benefits of USoc:
  - large sample size;
  - information about partnership histories and current partnership status, family networks, demographic and socio-economic characteristics.
- Sample: men and women living alone aged 35 to 64.
- Sample size: men=1,769 / women=1,657.
- Weight: individual level full interview only weight.
Measurement of variables

• **Living alone**: living in a single-person household.

• **Partnership history**: retrospective partnership histories are used to determine whether a person has:
  – never been in a co-residential partnership (never partnered);
  – ever been in a co-residential partnership (ever partnered): ever re-partnered, ever cohabited but never married, ever married.

• **Non-residential children**: none, yes at least one < 16, yes none < 16

• **Socio-economic characteristics**:
  – highest educational qualification: no qualifications, some qualifications, higher education;
  – current economic activity: full-time employed, part-time employed, not employed;
  – housing tenure: owner-occupier, social housing, private renting and other.

• **General health**: poor, not poor.
Methods

• Descriptive analysis.

• Latent Class Analysis (LCA):
  – cluster analysis for categorical data;
  – aim: to investigate whether different types of people living alone in mid-life can be identified;
  – main interest: number of latent classes, size, main characteristics;
  – separate analysis by gender;
  – input: age, partnership history, non-residential children, socio-economic characteristics, health.
Results: partnership history (1)

FIGURE 3. Partnership history of those living alone, by ten-year age groups (35-64) and gender (2009-2011)

Living alone in mid-life
Results: partnership history (2)

FIGURE 4. Partnership history of those living alone, by ten-year age groups (35-64) and gender (2009-2011)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>35-44</td>
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<td>45-54</td>
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<td>55-64</td>
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<td>35-44</td>
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<td>45-54</td>
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<tr>
<td>55-64</td>
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- Never partnered
- Ever cohabited & never married
- Ever married
Results: non-residential children

FIGURE 5. Non-residential children of those living alone, by ten-year age groups (35-64) and by gender (2009-2011)
## Results: Latent Class Analysis (men)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30%</td>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>never married&lt;br&gt;no children&lt;br&gt;some qualifications&lt;br&gt;employed&lt;br&gt;owner-occupiers&lt;br&gt;good health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13%</td>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>ever married&lt;br&gt;children (&lt;16)&lt;br&gt;some qualifications&lt;br&gt;employed&lt;br&gt;owner-occupiers&lt;br&gt;good health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11%</td>
<td>35-44</td>
<td>ever cohabited&lt;br&gt;no children&lt;br&gt;no / some qual.&lt;br&gt;not employed&lt;br&gt;social housing&lt;br&gt;poor health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21%</td>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>ever married&lt;br&gt;children (&gt;16)&lt;br&gt;some qualifications&lt;br&gt;employed&lt;br&gt;owner-occupiers&lt;br&gt;good health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14%</td>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>never partnered&lt;br&gt;no children&lt;br&gt;no / some qual.&lt;br&gt;not employed&lt;br&gt;social housing&lt;br&gt;poor health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10%</td>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>ever married&lt;br&gt;children (&gt;16)&lt;br&gt;no / some qual.&lt;br&gt;not employed&lt;br&gt;social housing&lt;br&gt;poor health</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*Living alone in mid-life*
Summary of the main results

- Partnership trajectories into living alone in mid-life are diverse.
  - Partnership dissolution is the main partnership trajectory;
  - Non-negligible proportion of men have never experienced a co-residential partnership;
  - Diversity in trajectories not captured by legal marital status alone.

- There are large gender differences in the presence and age of non-residential children.

- The middle-aged population living alone is heterogeneous.
Implications of the main findings

- Men and women living alone in late mid-life have a different mix of socio-economic and familial resources. These resources are associated with living arrangements in old age and the demand for formal support (public and private help).

- Previous research suggests that this demand may be higher among men living alone in old age because:
  - men are less likely than women to receive help from family members (controlling for the presence of children) (Tomassini, Glaser & Askham 2003);
  - among those who have children, divorced and widowed fathers receive less support from children than divorced or widowed mothers (Kalmijn 2007).

- This study indicates that certain groups living alone in late mid-life, in particular men, may experience difficulties in purchasing formal support in the case of need.
Emerging questions

- Have certain living types become more or less common over time? How has this influenced the socio-economic and kin resources of the population living alone in mid-life?
- Does the duration of living alone in mid-life vary between types?
- Will it become more common to have never experienced a co-residential partnership, or to have cohabited but never married amongst those living alone in mid-life?
- Will the partnership histories of middle-aged women living alone become more similar to those of middle-aged men living alone?
- Are there cross-national variations in this typology?
References


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