Old-age trajectories of life satisfaction. Do parenthood and partnership have a protective effect?

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Old age: the time of frailty and dependence on others

Various resources matter for old age quality of life, but lack of family resources may disadvantage the childless and single elderly

# More than 1m childless people over 65 are 'dangerously unsupported'
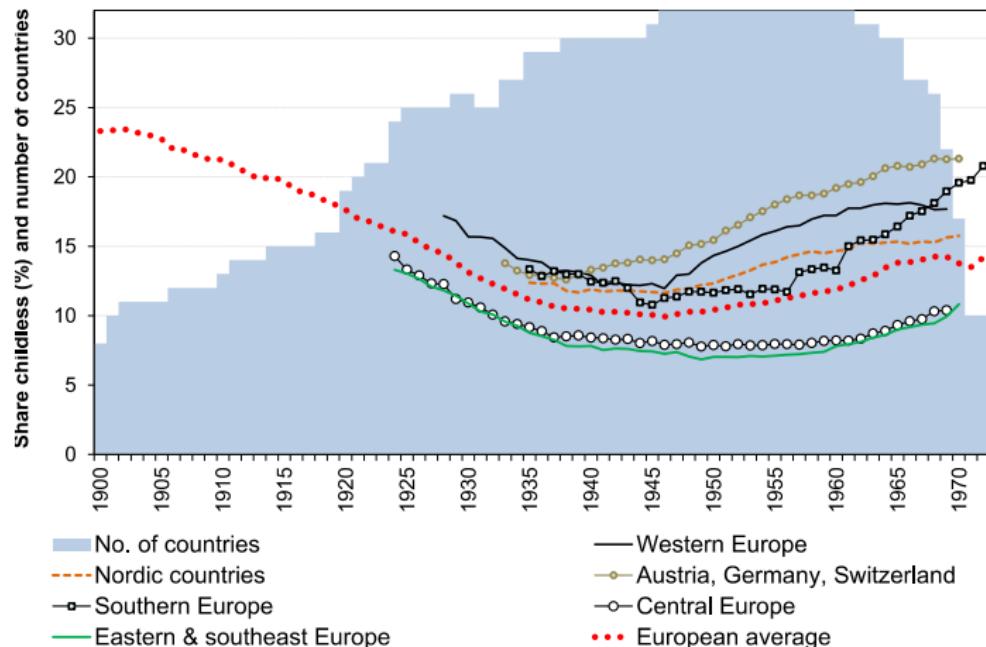
Older people without children at greater risk of isolation, poor health and inability to access formal care - report

▲ The number of childless older people in the UK is expected to double by 2030. Photograph: Glenn Hunt/AAP

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Increasingly important now, as family forms change

Childlessness in European regions:

Source: Sobotka (2017)

Family ties are related to life satisfaction

	childless smaller networks (Dykstra and Hagestad, 2007)	parents
married	heavily rely on the spouse women disadvantaged (Wenger et al., 2000)	strongest resources
widowed, divorced	lost support of the spouse especially men (Zhang and Hayward, 2001)	may rely on the child
never married	self-selection possible (Allen and Wiles, 2013) women positively self-selected (Cwikel et al., 2006)	may rely on the child

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Dynamics of life satisfaction in this context is understudied

Do people with various family biographies and experiences differ in old-age trajectories of life satisfaction?

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Two theoretical mechanisms

Cumulative advantage

With age, the differences among groups become more pronounced: initially disadvantaged people experience less positive changes
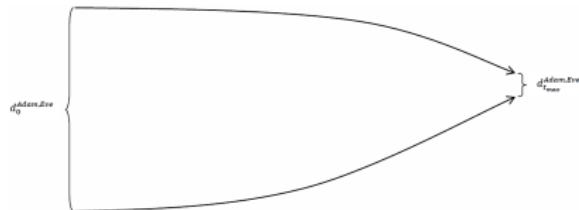

limited support:
Kim and Durden (2007); Pavlova and Silbereisen (2012)

Age-as-leveler

All old people experience the same biological constraints, and with age any other differences among people lose their importance

found support in health research:
Dupre (2007)

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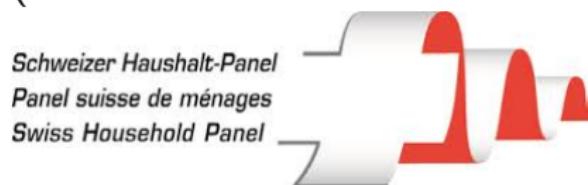
My objective

Contribute to understanding better the interplay between family resources and life satisfaction dynamics:

- ▶ Which family statuses are associated with lower life satisfaction at the entrance to old age?
- ▶ Do the differences grow as people get older (cumulative advantage) or do they reduce with age (age-as-leveler)?

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Data and context

Swiss Household Panel, 1999-2017
(life satisfaction from 2000 $\rightarrow$ 17 waves)

Schweizer Haushalt-Panel
Panel suisse de ménages
Swiss Household Panel

- ▶ stratified random sample of private households (CATI, since 2010 also web)
- ▶ follows the respondents until death or institutionalisation

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Research context

- common and accepted childlessness, low dependence between parents and adult children;
- wealthy, the best place in the world to grow old, according to the 2015 Global AgeWatch Index;

Study population

- separate analyses for people entering old age (50-70 y.o.) and those who already entered it (70-90 y.o.)
- sample selection: people observed initially at the age of 50-54 (or 70-74) and who participated in the panel for at least 5 waves:
  - aged 50-70: 1,039 men and 1,267 women (8,198 and 10,605 observations respectively)
  - aged 70-90: 444 men and 584 women (3,409 and 4,617 observations respectively)
- separate analyses for men and women

Scheme of the analysis

1. **initial differences in life satisfaction:** OLS regression for people aged 50-54 (or 70-74)

2. **dynamics of life satisfaction changes:** fixed-effects analysis for the full sample

▶ control social background (education, financial problems experienced at 15 y.o., coming from a single parent household, parental education): to account for selection into family situations

▶ control for retirement and (in the dynamic analysis) for changes of marital status

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Dependent variable

$\mu = 7.9$ at 50-54y.o.,
$\mu = 8.2$ at 70-74y.o.

"In general, how satisfied are you with your life if 0 means 'not at all satisfied' and 10 means 'completely satisfied'?"

Initial differences in life satisfaction

OLS results

	Men		Women	
	50-54	70-74	50-54	70-74
age	0.21^{***}	-0.06	0.10^{*}	0.10
divorced (ref: married)	-0.58^{***}	-0.24	-0.95^{***}	-0.13
widowed (ref: married)	0.62	-1.11^{**}	-0.63^{*}	-0.05
never married (ref: married)	-0.33	-0.68	-0.93^{*}	-2.06
childless	0.12	0.07	-0.22	0.29
divorced X childless	0.57	-0.06	-0.07	-0.32
widowed X childless	-0.72	2.75	0.33	0.02
never married X childless	-0.15	$-$	0.72	1.95
CONTROL VARIABLES:				
retired	-1.29	0.51^{*}	-0.16	-0.61^{*}
lower education	0.01	0.00	0.07	0.06
financial probs 15yo	-0.09	-0.44^{**}	-0.17	-0.45^{**}
single parent 15yo	-0.30	-0.02	-0.19	-0.41^{*}
lower edu parents 15yo	-0.03	0.11	-0.09	-0.07
intercept	8.00^{***}	8.14^{***}	8.32^{***}	9.04^{***}
Nr of individuals	765	361	974	471
adj. R^2	0.043	0.036	0.065	0.032

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Married people are more satisfied

	Men		Women	
	50-54	70-74	50-54	70-74
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Parenthood does not matter

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Cumulative advantage vs. age-as-leveler hypothesis

Do the life satisfaction differences intensify with age?

FE results: life satisfaction stable with age

	Men		Women	
	50-70	70-90	50-70	70-90
age	0.00	−0.01	−0.02*	−0.01
INITIAL MARITAL STATUS:				
divorced X age	0.02	0.01	0.04**	−0.01
widowed X age	−0.00	0.02	−0.02	−0.01
never married X age	−0.02	−0.01	0.04	−0.09
childless X age	0.00	−0.01	−0.01	−0.04
divorced X childless X age	−0.01	0.05	−0.00	−0.03
widowed X childless X age	0.01	−0.47***	0.06	0.06
never married X childless X age	0.03	–	−0.02	0.13
CHANGES OF MARITAL STATUS:				
year before/after death of spouse	−1.33**	−0.45*	−1.23***	−0.51**
married → widowed	−0.44	−0.59***	−0.68**	−0.27
year before/after divorce	−0.62*	−0.35	−0.67**	−1.20***
married → divorced	−0.23	0.10	−0.27	0.44***
year before/after marriage	0.25*	0.09	0.06	−0.59
divorced → married	0.13	–	0.19	–
widowed → married	–	–	–	–
never married → married	0.34	–	0.29	–
(...)				

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Divorced women improve their life satisfaction

	Men		Women	
	50-70	70-90	50-70	70-90
age	0.00	−0.01	−0.02*	−0.01
INITIAL MARITAL STATUS:				
divorced X age	0.02	0.01	0.04*·¹	−0.01
widowed X age	−0.00	0.02	−0.02	−0.01
never married X age	−0.02	−0.01	0.04	−0.09
childless X age	0.00	−0.01	−0.01	−0.04
divorced X childless X age	−0.01	0.05	−0.00	−0.03
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year before/after marriage	0.25*	0.09	0.06	−0.59
divorced → married	0.13	–	0.19	–
widowed → married	–	–	–	–
never married → married	0.34	–	0.29	–
(...)				

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Childless widowed men experience a decline

	Men		Women	
	50-70	70-90	50-70	70-90
age	0.00	−0.01	−0.02*	−0.01
INITIAL MARITAL STATUS:				
divorced X age	0.02	0.01	0.04**	−0.01
widowed X age	−0.00	0.02	−0.02	−0.01
never married X age	−0.02	−0.01	0.04	−0.09
childless X age	0.00	−0.01	−0.01	−0.04
divorced X childless X age	−0.01	0.05	−0.00	−0.03
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married → divorced	−0.23	0.10	−0.27	0.44***
year before/after marriage	0.25*	0.09	0.06	−0.59
divorced → married	0.13	–	0.19	–
widowed → married	–	–	–	–
never married → married	0.34	–	0.29	–
(...)				

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Marital transitions: no surprises

	Men		Women	
	50-70	70-90	50-70	70-90
age	0.00	−0.01	−0.02*	−0.01
INITIAL MARITAL STATUS:				
divorced X age	0.02	0.01	0.04**	−0.01
widowed X age	−0.00	0.02	−0.02	−0.01
never married X age	−0.02	−0.01	0.04	−0.09
childless X age	0.00	−0.01	−0.01	−0.04
divorced X childless X age	−0.01	0.05	−0.00	−0.03
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never married → married	0.34	–	0.29	–
(...)				

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No effect of early life disadvantage

	Men		Women	
	50-70	70-90	50-70	70-90
(...continued)				
CONTROL VARIABLES:				
transition into retirement	0.20**	−0.49*	0.12	−0.48**
lower education X age	−0.01	0.01	−0.00	−0.01
financial problems at 15yo X age	−0.01	−0.02	0.00	0.02
single parent family at 15yo X age	−0.01	0.01	0.01	0.00
lower educated parents at 15yo X age	−0.00	−0.01	0.01	−0.01
intercept	7.93***	8.86***	8.00***	8.70***
N	8198	3409	10605	4617
adj. R^2	0.009	0.017	0.021	0.013
Nr of individuals	1039	444	1267	584

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Conclusions (1)

Marital status:

- ▶ Unmarried elderly are less satisfied with their lives than married, but their life satisfaction does not erode at faster rate
- ▶ On the contrary, divorced women catch up with married at the entry to old age
  age-as-leveler mechanism?

Parenthood:

- ▶ Childlessness does not correlate with lower life satisfaction
- ▶ But widowed childless men have disproportionally negative trajectories of life satisfaction in group 70+
  cumulative (dis)advantage mechanism?

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Conclusions (2)

Cumulative advantage vs. age-as-leveler:

- ▶ Divorced women catch up, widowed childless men experience a decline
- ▶ BUT overall results are not consistent with any of the hypotheses: there is no general pattern of accumulating / levelling off of the life satisfaction disadvantage related to family situation

→ Gender differences in gender-traditional society?

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Thank you!

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