



Old-age Trajectories of Life Satisfaction.

Are Singlehood and Childlessness an Increasing Disadvantage at More Advanced Old Age?

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Goal:

I analysed life satisfaction among elderly people in various family situations to test whether the (possible) disadvantage related to being single or childless increased or reduced as people moved towards a more advanced old age.

Importance:

An increasing number of people are ageing without close kin and life expectancy grows. Thus, it is important to understand whether kinlessness becomes a greater disadvantage as people progress into old age.

Theory:

Two competing theories address the changing importance of (any) resources during old age.

- The theoretical mechanism of **cumulative (dis)advantage** predicts that the disadvantage grows at more advanced old age because the negative effect accumulates over time.
- In contrast, **age-as-leveler mechanism** predicts that differences reduce because at advanced old age everybody faces the same old-age challenges.

Availability of **social support** is a plausible

mechanism linking family situation and life satisfaction. Therefore, I explored the role of support availability (from relatives and from friends and neighbors) for old age differences and dynamics of life satisfaction.

Data and Method:

I used Swiss Household Panel data and focused on two cohorts of respondents aged 60-74 and 75-89. The use of panel data allows me to study on intra-individual change with fixed effects models. Focus on two cohorts provides insights on situation of younger old and older elderly.

Results:

Married people were consistently more satisfied with their lives than the singles, but the differences did not systematically increase with age. Thus, the analysis provided **no clear support** to neither *cumulative (dis)advantage* nor the *age-as-leveler* model. For instance, the life satisfaction gap between never married and married parents increased with age, whereas the gap between divorced and married mothers reduced at more advanced old age.

Childless people did not have lower life

satisfaction than parents. On the contrary, in some groups (divorced men, never married women) childlessness seemed an advantage.

The only exception were **men during transition to widowhood**, who were disproportionately negatively affected by the transition if they were childless. This effect was mediated by changes of support availability.

Although availability of social **support** predicted life satisfaction and its changes, it **did not explain the life satisfaction gaps** among people in various family situations.

Conclusions:

The results suggest that life satisfaction dynamics during old age are shaped by a **complex set of mechanisms**, and some relatively disadvantaged groups may improve their situation, whereas other disadvantaged groups may experience a further decline.

In practical terms, the results point to the **never married mothers** as a group for whom old age is especially challenging, and whose subjective well-being is particularly at risk.

Table 1: Life satisfaction at the beginning of observation period as a function of family status. OLS models.

	Men:		Women:	
	Age 60/64	Age 75/79	Age 60/64	Age 75/79
divorced (ref: married)	-0.49** (0.18)	-0.57 (0.31)	-0.89*** (0.15)	-0.34 (0.34)
widowed (ref: married)	-1.38*** (0.38)	-0.02 (0.34)	-0.67*** (0.20)	-0.20 (0.21)
never married (ref: married)	0.28 (1.00)	0.49 (1.37)	-2.12*** (0.52)	-0.36 (1.75)
childless	0.19 (0.21)	0.40 (0.35)	0.01 (0.22)	0.08 (0.60)
divorced X childless	0.50 (0.45)	-0.34 (1.44)	0.33 (0.44)	0.77 (1.10)
widowed X childless	3.08* (1.48)	-0.04 (0.77)	-0.73 (0.66)	-0.55 (0.76)
never married X childless	-1.08 (1.06)	-1.12 (1.48)	1.29* (0.61)	0.21 (1.87)
retired	0.30* (0.14)	-0.20 (0.62)	0.39** (0.14)	0.30 (0.49)
lower education	-0.23* (0.11)	-0.07 (0.18)	0.05 (0.12)	-0.16 (0.21)
intercept	8.34*** (0.08)	8.72*** (0.61)	8.39*** (0.11)	8.07*** (0.51)
N	723	255	919	386

Source: Swiss Household Panel, 1999-2017

Table 2: Changes of life satisfaction during old age. Fixed effects models

	Men:		Women:	
	Age 60-74	Age 75-89	Age 60-74	Age 75-89
age	-0.02** (0.01)	-0.03 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.02)
divorced X age	0.03 (0.02)	-0.00 (0.04)	0.05** (0.02)	0.01 (0.03)
widowed X age	0.02 (0.04)	0.02 (0.03)	-0.00 (0.02)	0.02 (0.02)
never married X age	-0.08 (0.05)	-0.03 (0.01)	0.15 (0.08)	-0.57*** (0.02)
childless X age	0.00 (0.02)	-0.04 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.04 (0.04)
divorced X childless X age	0.06 (0.05)	0.38*** (0.06)	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.13 (0.12)
widowed X childless X age	-0.02 (0.05)	-0.00 (0.07)	0.17 (0.10)	-0.02 (0.06)
never married X childless X age	0.14* (0.06)	-0.01 (0.06)	-0.12 (0.09)	0.61*** (0.05)
married -> widowed	-0.06 (0.34)	-0.26 (0.28)	-0.40 (0.21)	0.00 (0.15)
married -> widowed X childless	-2.22*** (0.37)	-1.07** (0.36)	0.93 (0.55)	-0.15 (0.35)
married -> divorced	0.00 (0.56)	-1.33*** (0.09)	-0.23 (0.24)	0.70*** (0.04)
married -> divorced X childless	0.01 (0.56)	2.43*** (0.26)	0.24 (0.28)	0.00 (0.34)
divorced -> married	-0.12 (0.28)	-0.28 (0.34)	-0.28 (0.34)	0.00 (0.15)
divorced -> married X childless	1.36*** (0.31)	-0.53 (0.36)	0.28 (0.15)	0.00 (0.34)
never married -> married	-0.12 (0.12)	0.69*** (0.00)	0.28 (0.15)	0.00 (0.15)
transition into retirement	0.10* (0.05)	0.10 (0.40)	-0.01 (0.05)	-0.08 (0.34)
lower education X age	-0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.02)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.02)
intercept	8.23*** (0.03)	8.34*** (0.40)	8.20*** (0.03)	8.21*** (0.33)
N	6083	2021	7921	3043
Nr of individuals	723	255	919	386

Source: Swiss Household Panel, 1999-2017

Table 3: Changes of life satisfaction during old age. Fixed effects models accounting for support availability.

	Men:		Women:	
	Age 60-74	Age 75-89	Age 60-74	Age 75-89
age	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.03* (0.02)	-0.01 (0.01)	-0.02 (0.03)
divorced X age	0.01 (0.02)	-0.04 (0.05)	0.03 (0.02)	0.00 (0.04)
widowed X age	0.06 (0.04)	-0.02 (0.05)	0.02 (0.03)	0.01 (0.03)
never married X age	-0.08 (0.06)	0.06** (0.02)	0.24** (0.09)	-0.30*** (0.03)
childless X age	-0.01 (0.02)	-0.11 (0.08)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.10 (0.05)
divorced X childless X age	0.11 (0.06)	0.38*** (0.11)	-0.00 (0.04)	0.10 (0.21)
widowed X childless X age	-0.03 (0.05)	0.07 (0.11)	0.18 (0.12)	0.12 (0.07)
never married X childless X age	0.13* (0.07)	-0.04 (0.10)	-0.18 (0.09)	0.39*** (0.08)
support from friends or neighbors	0.04* (0.01)	0.05** (0.02)	0.02 (0.01)	0.00 (0.02)
support from relatives	-0.01 (0.01)	0.01 (0.02)	0.02 (0.01)	0.03 (0.01)
married -> widowed	0.01 (0.60)	0.06 (0.45)	-0.46 (0.28)	-0.00 (0.21)
married -> divorced	-0.02 (0.85)	-1.05*** (0.15)	-0.20 (0.22)	0.00 (0.15)
married -> divorced X childless	0.29 (0.85)	4.15*** (0.28)	0.28 (0.15)	0.00 (0.16)
divorced -> married	0.06 (0.41)	0.28 (0.15)	0.28 (0.15)	0.00 (0.16)
divorced -> married X childless	-0.21 (0.11)	0.28*** (0.04)	0.29 (0.16)	0.00 (0.16)
never married -> married	-0.21 (0.11)	0.28*** (0.04)	0.29 (0.16)	0.00 (0.16)
married -> widowed X childless	-0.94 (0.59)	2.10** (0.64)	0.25 (1.11)	0.00 (1.11)
transition into retirement	0.04 (0.07)	-0.95*** (0.09)	-0.02 (0.06)	0.52 (0.44)
lower education X age	-0.00 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.02)	0.01 (0.03)
intercept	8.09*** (0.11)	9.06*** (0.12)	7.98*** (0.12)	7.46*** (0.45)
N	3475	1171	4643	1760
Nr of individuals	711	252	907	382

Source: Swiss Household Panel, 1999-2017

Country context:

- Ageing society
- Highest life satisfaction among OECD countries (OECD, 2019), the best place in the world to grow old (2015 Global AgeWatch Index)
- Retirement age 64 (women) - 65 (men) years
- Childlessness common and accepted
- Common "autonomous family type", comprising families where parents and adult children tend to live far away, have relatively little contact, and exchange relatively little support (Dykstra and Fokkema, 2011).

