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Defining and measuring singlehood in family studies

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Abstract

Many authors have documented a global rise in singlehood during the past decades, expanding beyond Western or industrialized countries. Simultaneously, the number of single households is increasing, not only due to the aging of the population, but also because young adults are increasingly living solo. Whereas having no partner and solo living do not necessarily coincide, existing studies tend to overlook this distinction. In this paper, we provide conceptual clarity as to what types of singlehood can be distinguished, through a framework that builds on two dimensions: living solo and being partnered. Next, we delve into the issue of measurement. We illustrate the issues in implementing an extended singlehood framework to empirical data. To do so, we examine internationally comparative retrospective studies and prospective panel studies, and identify three levels of operationalization that current datasets achieve when identifying a redefined notion of singlehood.

KEYWORDS

measurement, operationalization, singlehood definition

INTRODUCTION

During the 20th century, societal and legal notions concerning relationships changed drastically across the world, with the dominant pattern of lifelong marriage giving way to consecutive relationship formations and dissolutions (Mortelmans et al., 2016). More recently, research has begun to focus on what is considered the next relational trend, namely *singlehood*. Starting with Western and industrialized countries (Esteve et al., 2020), multiple authors have documented the expansion of singlehood across the world, marking it as a global phenomenon (Cheung & Yeung, 2021; Esteve et al., 2020; Perelli-Harris & Lyons-Amos, 2015). However, despite consensus on its increasing prevalence, existing studies employ a diversity of definitions of "being single," with a subsequently large variety in approaches and results in empirical studies. This is

mainly due to the confounding of "not having a romantic partner" with "living alone," which is a related—but not always coinciding—trend. Consider, for example, the dramatic increase in the share of single-person households in Europe over the last two decades to a current average of 35% (EuroStat, 2021). Although this is partially due to the notable rise in widowed women and single parents, another significant and growing contributor to single-person households are young adults who live solo for an increasing period of time (Bellani et al., 2018). Additionally, the increasing attention on living apart together (LAT) relationships challenges the notion that all romantic couples live together, especially in a time where independence is highly valued (Pasteels et al., 2015; Perelli-Harris & Lyons-Amos, 2015).

In the current paper, we argue that this conjunction of "solo living" and "being unpartnered" risks muddling the emerging field of singlehood studies, as it results in a plethora of approaches to the concept of singlehood. Although focused approaches are useful for singular studies, they complicate cumulative scientific insights on the single population, as—the validity of specific operationalizations notwithstanding—the lack of a definitive baseline for the measurement of singlehood prevents both temporal and geographical comparative research, resulting in the lack of a comprehensive picture of the issue. Considering the worldwide increase in singlehood, the identification of common causes and the subsequent anticipation of potential consequences are crucial in being able to meaningfully (re)direct policy concerning the single population. In this respect, the current paper has the distinct aim to improve the conceptual clarity within the field of singlehood studies. Building on the description and measurement of singlehood in existing qualitative and quantitative research, we propose a framework which distinguishes single people on the dimensions of living situation and partnership status. Combining these dimensions provides a three-type categorization of singlehood in terms of partnered but living alone, unpartnered but not living alone, and unpartnered and living alone. As such, we provide a conceptual baseline and categorization tool to guide both future theoretical and empirical work on singlehood. The framework we propose aims primarily at the quantitative measurement of being single and, more specifically, its comparative and longitudinal measurement in surveys, although our framework might also inspire qualitative researchers when using narrative methods. Mainly, we believe that conceptual clarity and a unified measurement of singlehood will help future studies to gain better insight about both trends across societies and the causes and consequences of periods of being single across the life course.

THE RISE IN AND PREVALENCE OF SINGLEHOOD STUDIES

When attempting to categorize the concept of singlehood, it is crucial to understand the dynamics behind its emergence and prevalence in existing research. Generally considered of great importance in this respect is the Second Demographic Transition, when marriage as the main institution for union and family formation began to lose dominance in the developed world, countered by a markable shift toward unmarried cohabitation and childrearing (Sobotka & Toulemon, 2008). Although the decrease in marriage has become a worldwide phenomenon, there seems to be consensus that the initial driving force, originating in Western societies, was value oriented (Esteve et al., 2020; van den Berg & Verbakel, 2022). The 1960's marked the beginning of an ideational shift toward individualism and self-realization, which considerably loosened expectations surrounding union and family formation (Lesthaeghe, 1995; Van Hek et al., 2016). The subsequent rise in separations, serial partnerships and unwed childrearing forced demographic and sociological research to substitute "Mount Marriage" with "Mount Couple," in order to account for the changing dynamics of family and partner relationships (DePaulo, 2014, p. 64).

Currently, another shift is looming, driven by the rising prevalence of singlehood. Worldwide, researchers note an increasing proportion of people living alone and/or without a partner

(Esteve et al., 2020; Jackson, 2018; Jones et al., 2012; van den Berg & Verbakel, 2022), marking a singlehood trend that remains invisible within a couple-oriented research focus in family studies. It is in this respect that DePaulo and Morris (2005) advocated the urgent need for a singles study discipline, which has led to a slow but steady increase in the amount of singles-oriented research. As such, we are beginning to understand more clearly the increase in singlehood across the life course. Starting with the period of leaving the parental home, being single has become a key part of the transition into adulthood (Billari & Liefbroer, 2010; Rosenfeld, 2007; van den Berg & Verbakel, 2022). Meanwhile, financial independence has significantly diminished the importance of family-based co-residence for young adults (Lesthaeghe, 2014) and increased the potential for and prevalence of life-long singlehood (Bellani et al., 2017). Furthermore, the extensively documented rise in union dissolution among both married and cohabiting couples (Mortelmans, 2020a) results in many people experiencing at least temporary spells of singlehood during the life course. Finally, longevity and spousal loss add to the proportion of the older single population and spark attention for being single in later life (Reher & Requena, 2018).

However, cultural and temporal variations are emblematic of studying singlehood across countries, as the interpretation, registration and experience of being single can vary greatly. As such, most research remains focused on national or regional settings (Bergström et al., 2019; López-Gay et al., 2014; Wiik & Dommermuth, 2014; Yeung & Cheung, 2015) or on specific aspects of life, such as young adulthood (Tuval-Mashiach et al., 2015; van den Berg & Verbakel, 2022) or old age (Padyab et al., 2019; Reher & Requena, 2018). We attribute the abundance of such non-comparative approaches to a lack of common language. Although specific operationalizations are useful within individual studies, comparatively mapping the rise and prevalence of singlehood becomes a challenge without a uniting framework. Moreover, it undermines the interpretability and applicability of research findings, and fragments the field of singlehood studies (DePaulo, 2014).

Indeed, when delving into empirical research on singlehood, one immediately notes the kaleidoscope of research designs, sample definitions, and methodology. Nevertheless, it is also clear that all approaches to the concept of singlehood to some extent relate to one or both of two main dimensions that determine an individual's status as a single person. The first dimension concerns the *living situation* of a person in terms of household composition, meaning whether one lives alone or not. The second dimension is *relational*, encompassing whether or not an individual is considered to be in a romantic relationship. Building on this communality among empirical studies, the next section considers the existing conceptualizations of being single within each dimension. In doing so, we demonstrate how these can be linked through an encompassing conceptual framework of singlehood.

CURRENT THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO SINGLEHOOD IN FAMILY STUDIES

The household composition dimension

The first dimension that research into singlehood often employs is the composition of the household in which single people reside. Although this dimension is often used in studies that focus on the increase in single-person households at the societal level, it has featured in studies on individual outcomes as well, for instance how the rise in solo living affects the housing market with a larger demand for smaller residences, how it creates pressures in terms of poverty and inequality (e.g., due to higher living costs) (Bennett & Dixon, 2006; Quintano & D'Agostino, 2006), and how it increases the risk of loneliness and mental health problems (Delafontaine et al., 2023; Hill et al., 2009). As the incidence of single-person households and solo living has increasingly attracted research interest over the past decades, so the household dimension was increasingly used in empirical research.

However, we see considerable variation in how the interpretation of singlehood as "living alone" is approached. Some studies focus particularly on the aspect of solo living, the strict interpretation of a single-person household (Hill et al., 2009; Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2016). A pertinent example of this approach is the large-scale comparative study of Esteve et al. (2020), which highlights the shaping of solo living trends through individualism, culture, policies, and economic and demographical realities within European societies. Meanwhile, this lens of individualism and societal dynamics has led other researchers to indicate the importance of distinguishing solo living in a single-person household from living without a romantic partner (Fokkema & Liefbroer, 2008). For example, van den Berg and Verbakel (2022) study singlehood among young adults after leaving the parental home specifically as living without a partner—which does not necessarily coincide with living "alone." As such, their aim is to identify the emergence of a cultural and value-driven deviation from the classic relationship trajectory (i.e., a desynchronization of home leaving and union formation), while acknowledging the emerging trend of co-housing in early adulthood. Relatedly, the earlier mentioned societal dynamics in relationship formation and dissolution have given way to a significant number of single-parent households (Bernardi & Mortelmans, 2018). Although these would be missed through a strict interpretation of "solo living," being the only adult and earner in a household—especially with dependent children—can be a substantial financial, psychological and relational burden (Hübgen, 2018; Maldonado & Nieuwenhuis, 2015) for which tailored policy-informing research is required. Furthermore, Letablier and Wall (2018) pose the question if lone parenthood refers to the solo living of one parent with dependent children or whether lone parenthood can also involve multi-unit households where the lone parent lives with their parents. Even though this particular discussion on parenthood falls outside the scope of this article, the issue of multi-unit households will return later when we develop our conceptual framework of singlehood.

It is important to note that both singlehood interpretations of the household composition dimension—solo living and not living with a partner—have their limits, as neither necessarily implies the lack of a romantic relationship (Poortman & Liefbroer, 2010). This is an important consideration, as research on Living Apart Together [LAT] relationships (e.g., Holmes, 2006; Roseneil, 2006) reminds us not to assume that people who live alone are "single" in the sense of "unpartnered." Similarly, because unpartnered people can be in shared living arrangements (such as the parental home or co-housing with peers), this category does not necessarily coincide with people who live alone (Jamieson et al., 2009; van den Berg & Verbakel, 2022). This is empirically backed by Esteve et al. (2020) who found that, despite the correlation of the marital status of "single" with living alone, unpartnered individuals live in many different arrangements around the world, and not just in single-person households. In this respect, Jamieson and Simpson (2013) broaden the view on singlehood by differentiating between solo living individuals who are unpartnered and those who are in a relationship with someone who lives elsewhere (i.e., LAT relationships), thus combining the criterion of living alone with the relationship dimension in their analysis.

The household dimension is predominantly used in studies where household composition matters. An example is the field of household economics and wealth in partnerships (for a review, see: Kapelle, 2023). Within couples, income and wealth are unequally divided, which has an impact on the economic consequences of particularly single women when a couple breaks up (Mortelmans, 2020b). These gendered inequalities are also found in solo living partners in a LAT relationship due to the economies of scale (Lyssens-Danneboom & Mortelmans, 2014). The most important effects in this respect have been found among parents where the poverty risk of single parents is substantially higher than coupled partners (Hübgen, 2018).

TABLE 1 Overview of empirical studies and operationalization of singlehood.

Publication	Dataset	Definition of singlehood + age range	Design & time period	Country	Dimension[a]
Adamczyk, 2017	Random sample of university students ($N = 320$)	Never married without children (20–26 years)	Cross-sectional survey (2017)	Poland	Relationship
Adamczyk, 2018	Random sample ($N = 556$)	Self-definition "I am a single" (20–36 years)	Cross-sectional survey (2018)	Poland	Relationship
Apostolou et al., 2020	Convenience sample ($N = 647$)	Not in a romantic relationship (18+)	Cross-sectional survey (2020)	United States	Relationship
Bellani et al., 2017	European Social Survey (ESS), European Values Study (EVS) ($N = 83{,}978$)	Never partnered (coresidential) (40–55 years)	Repeated cross-sectional survey (ESS, 2002–14; EVS, 2008)	Europe	Relationship
Bennett & Dixon, 2006	Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM)	Single person household (16+)	Register data	United Kingdom	Household
Bergström et al., 2019	EPIC ($N = 7825$)	Not in a romantic relationship (26–65 years)	Cross-sectional survey (2013–2014)	France	Relationship
Byrne & Carr, 2005	Midlife development in the United States (MIDUS) survey ($N = 3000$)	Never married (25–74 years)	Cross-sectional survey (1995)	United States	Relationship
Dykstra & Poortman, 2010	Netherlands kinship panel study ($N = 4927$)	Never partnered by age 40 (40+)	Panel study (2002–2003)	The Netherlands	Relationship
Fokkema & Liefbroer, 2008	Labor force survey	Single person household (20–75 years)	Repeated cross sectional survey (1987–2002)	Europe	Household
Frazier et al., 1996	Convenience sample ($N = 251$)	Unmarried adults (31–68 years), exclusion of widow(er)s	Cross-sectional survey (1996)	United States	Relationship
Frost et al., 2016	Lives and relationships study ($N = 146$)	Not in a romantic relationship (18+)	Panel study (2008–2011)	United States & Canada	Relationship
Esteve et al., 2020	Integrated Public Use of Microdata Series-International (IPUMS-I)	Single person household (25–79 years)	Register data (2000–2019)	113 countries	Household
	Convenience sample ($N = 200$)		Panel study (5.5 years)	United States	Relationship

(Continues)

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TABLE 1 (Continued)

Publication	Dataset	Definition of singlehood + age range	Design & time period	Country	Dimension[a]
Furman & Collibee, 2014		Not in a romantic relationship (15 year)			
Hafford et al., 2017	Convenience sample ($N = 126$)	Single person household (50+)	Cross sectional survey (2017)	United Kingdom	Household
Hill et al., 2009	International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) ($N = 8426$)	Single person household (50+)	Repeated cross sectional survey (2001)	Europe	Household
Hostetler, 2009	Convenience sample ($N = 94$)	Self-definition (35+)	Cross-sectional survey (2009)	United States	Relationship
Loewenstein et al., 1981	Convenience sample ($N = 60$)	Never-married, widowed, divorced, or separated and self-definition as single (35–65 years)	Cross-sectional survey (1981)	United States	Relationship
Poortman & Liefbroer, 2010	Panel study of social integration in the Netherlands ($N = 836$)	Not steady partner, not married, not cohabiting (18+)	Panel study (1987–2006)	The Netherlands	Relationship
Sarkisian & Gerstel, 2016	National survey of families and households general social survey	Never married, single person household (18+)	Panel study (NSFH, 1992–1994 GSS, 2000–2014;)	United States	Household
Quintano & D'Agostino, 2006	European Community Household Panel (ECHP) survey ($N = 42{,}930$)	Single person household (16+)	Panel study (1994–1996)	FR, IT, DE & United Kingdom	Household
Raymo et al., 2021	Japanese National Fertility Survey (JNFS) ($N = 7500$) Japanese Life Course Panel Survey (JLPS) ($N = 2338$)	Unmarried adults (JNFS: 19–49; JLPS: 20–40 years)	Panel study (JNFS, 1982–2015; JLPS, 2007–2015)	Japan	Relationship
van den Berg & Verbakel, 2022	European social survey ($N = 29{,}970$)	Single person household (15+)	Repeated cross sectional survey (2006, 2018)	Europe	Household

[a]Main dimension that determines an individual's status as a single person (Household: based on household composition (solo living or not); Relationship: based on having a romantic partner or not).

The relationship dimension

This second dimension relates singlehood to whether or not one is in a romantic relationship. Although this covers a significant portion of the singlehood field (see Table 1), the interpretations of existing research concerning whether or not someone is in a romantic relationship vary widely. Earlier studies typically focused on singlehood in reference to marriage, in the sense that being single was approached as being divorced, widowed, or never married (e.g., Frazier et al., 1996; Loewenstein et al., 1981). Although these legal statuses remain the focal point of some modern research, this is mainly the case for more traditionally-oriented settings (e.g., Beri & Beri, 2013; Hamedanchi et al., 2021; Situmorang, 2007). Without additional information, however, this tends to result in previously married people (i.e., divorced, separated, and/or widowed) being merged into a singles category (Byrne & Carr, 2005; Kislev, 2018). This has become problematic in light of decreasing marriage rates. For example, a recent study found almost 40% of Japanese adult women to be unmarried (Himawan et al., 2018), whereas only 60% of those women were estimated to actually be unpartnered (Raymo et al., 2021). Similarly, even though American projections estimate that by 2040 1 in 4 adults will never have been married (Wang & Parker, 2014), this does not imply that being unpartnered will rise to the same degree. In general, therefore, singlehood studies have followed the sociological and demographic acknowledgement of the abovementioned dynamics in relationship formation and dissolution, with a divergence between marital status and actual partnership status.

Although less tangible for singlehood researchers, marital status therefore has slowly made space for the broader perspective of "not having a partner." As such, a common approach to being single is now the self-reported (and thus subjective) perception of not being in a romantic relationship (Adamczyk, 2018). However, expanding the baseline of singlehood beyond marital status allows for fluidity and variation in its interpretation, both when respondents themselves indicate being single (e.g., in self-administered surveys or in-depth interviews), or when researchers make use of existing data to code partnership statuses (e.g., panel data). In this sense, we can identify variation in measurement criteria pertaining to singlehood.

First, there are studies that identify single people broadly by the notion of "not being in a relationship" (e.g., Adamczyk, 2017; Hostetler, 2009; Poortman & Liefbroer, 2010), but these still vary in their threshold for "being in a relationship." Sexuality studies show that even the term "partner" is greatly open to interpretation, as the rise in the so-called *hook-up culture* (Garcia et al., 2012) shows that individuals (especially young adults) differentiate between "committed partners" and "uncommitted partners" (Monto & Carey, 2014). Nevertheless, what defines this first interpretation of singlehood is the tendency to disregard marital status and to consider being single as being unpartnered, irrespective of the civil status of the individual. Second, there are studies that explicitly incorporate (but do not exclusively rely on) marital status in identifying unpartnered individuals, by differentiating between married persons, those in a relationship, and those who are single (Apostolou et al., 2020). Notable in this respect is the focus researchers tend to place on the aspect of "never married" unpartnered individuals (Adamczyk, 2017). Finally, there are those studies that take a particularly fine-grained approach to identifying being single, either by employing more than one question to ensure a respondent fits the singlehood criteria of the study (Frost et al., 2016), or through a detailed scale (e.g., the Romantic Involvement and Commitment Scale, Dush and Amato (2005)) to conceptualize various "levels" of singlehood (Furman & Collibee, 2014). The distinction between the household and relationship dimensions becomes challenging when attempting to compare or aggregate findings. This is especially true considering the myriad of topics the abovementioned studies cover, varying between reasons for being or staying unpartnered (Hostetler, 2009), the consequences of singlehood (Adamczyk, 2017, 2018), subjective experiences of single people (Bergström et al., 2019) and stigmatization (Byrne & Carr, 2005). In addition, socio-demographic variation in being or remaining unpartnered, such as gender differences or financial power (Dykstra & Poortman, 2010) have

gained considerable attention. Concerning the temporal factor, the existing research covers both specific periods in the life course, such as being single at a young age (Adamczyk, 2017) versus later in life (Baumbusch, 2004) and being unpartnered in terms of temporal spells, such as short-term singlehood (Frost et al., 2016) versus permanent or lifelong singlehood (Bellani et al., 2017; Dykstra & Poortman, 2010). Individually, all these studies provide crucial insights into the unpartnered experience, its trajectory, and its causes and consequences. However, it is clear that the lack of common ground hinders integration into a larger, comparative picture.

As we show in Table 1, the relationship dimension has been used in most quantitative singlehood studies. The focus of these studies is to predominantly gain knowledge of the effect of (not) having a partner on a diversity of outcomes. It provides insight both into how outcomes differ between partnered and non-partnered individuals and the effect of having a partner in itself. Illustrative in this respect is the literature on the marriage premium in health. A longstanding thesis in family studies states that marriage promotes both mental and physical health (for a review on early studies in this field, see Carr & Springer, 2010). Later studies have shown that not marriage per se but simply having a partner explains this premium, as no differences were found between married and cohabiting couples (Wu & Hart, 2002). More recent studies question these findings even further by stating that the partner premium is limited to life satisfaction and does not affect mental health outcomes (Kalmijn, 2017; Kislev, 2019b). The shifting meaning of partnership and the institutionalization of singlehood have been suggested as explanations for these findings (e.g., Hiekel et al., 2014; Perelli-Harris et al., 2014).

Qualitative and quantitative research and dimensions of singlehood

The aim of this paper is to provide a new conceptualization of singlehood that can be used in large-scale surveys across time and space. In the previous paragraphs, we have selected quantitative studies to show how empirical research relies on two dimensions when sampling single people. Our selection does not imply that these dimensions are irrelevant for qualitative studies. However, even as these have also used the same two dimensions, they typically go further by showing the lived experience of single people using a self-definition of being single.

Most qualitative studies on singlehood rely on theoretical samples obtained through snowballing techniques (Burgess, 1984) However, both the theoretical sampling and the snowballing methodology imply a starting criterion to select and convince respondents to participate in the study. Again, most studies used either the relationship status (Apostolou, 2017; Finn, 2012; Lai et al., 2015) or the living situation of participants (Mavcvarish, 2006). Two studies used both dimensions for their recruitment but only along one axis, including solo living participants as well as individuals currently having no romantic relationship (Reynolds, 2008; Reynolds & Taylor, 2005; Reynolds & Wetherell, 2003; Simpson, 2015).

For the purpose of this paper, the difference between the qualitative and the quantitative studies lies in the way they use their sample criteria. For the quantitative studies, the sample determines the definition of singlehood, and the actual definition of being single is not the object of the research. For many qualitative studies, the sample criteria are a starting point after which participants are asked to define their status of being single. After being (self-)selected, participants share their lived experience of singlehood (e.g., Reynolds, 2008). Starting from these self-definitions, qualitative studies have brought deeper insight in the daily lives of single people—particularly of single women (Lahad, 2017; Reynolds, 2008; Simpson, 2015), the reasons for staying single (Apostolou, 2017), the discrimination experienced by single people (Budgeon, 2008; DePaulo & Morris, 2016), their life satisfaction (Kislev, 2019a; Klinenberg, 2012), and their identity (Mavcvarish, 2006). Some qualitative studies have even influenced quantitative surveys. This is the case for the voluntariness of being single (Adamczyk, 2017) which has been adopted as a

question in the German panel study Pairfam (Brüderl et al., 2022), or the quantitative measurement of reasons to stay single (Apostolou et al., 2020).

Despite these differences in methodology and scientific insights, we found no other criteria in qualitative studies that would contribute to our framework. Although self-definitions of singlehood are a valuable contribution to the literature, they would not allow for a comprehensive yet parsimonious framework. Furthermore, most qualitative studies use relationship status or living situation as a starting criterion. We therefore argue that defining the concept of singlehood needs to start from these two previously discussed dimensions. In the next paragraph, we present an integrated conceptualization that combines the two dimensions.

AN INTEGRATED CONCEPTUALIZATION OF SINGLEHOOD

Concurring with Roseneil's (2006) call for the need to deconstruct the category of "single," we propose a categorization of singlehood based on the aforementioned relational and living situation dimensions. As a conceptual foundation, this categorization will not only strengthen the integration of specific studies in the domain of single studies, but also identify the complementarity of currently (seemingly) disparate research more clearly. The proposed framework is presented in Table 2.

Within our framework the columns represent the *relational* dimension—that is, whether or not someone is in a romantic relationship, whereas the rows account for the *living situation*, namely household composition, distinguishing between whether someone lives in a one-person or multiple person household. The *partnership dimension* can be considered as the unregistered dimension, as the absence of a partner is often used as the lived experience of being single out of sight of official instances. Multiple person households in this typology are defined as individuals living together with other people that are *not* their romantic partner. It goes without saying that someone cohabiting (married or not) with a (romantic or committed) partner in a multiple person household is never considered to be single and is therefore not mentioned in Table 2. The *living condition* of a person is related to the registered dimension, as this situation is registered by the authorities and could be drawn from official register data. At this point, we exclude children from the discussion in order to avoid overloading the framework. As our aim is to define singlehood, we take the perspective of the adult vis-à-vis a romantic partner. In doing so, we do not make a difference between a solo living adult or a lone parent living alone with their children, which also avoids discussions on the definition of lone parents in situations of shared custody (Bernardi & Mortelmans, 2018; Letablier & Wall, 2018).

The combination of the relational and living condition dimensions yields three categories of singles: *committed LAT-singles* (*Type 1*), *co-housing singles* (*Type 2*), and *solo living singles* (*Type 3*). We thereby opt to disregard the first cell (first row, first column) as an actual singles category. This group represents individuals who have been referred to in the LAT literature as *dating LATs* (Pasteels et al., 2015), here conceptualized as people who are in a relationship while living in a multiple person household other than their partner. The term *dating LAT* originated from the empirical finding that this groups consists largely of young adults who have a partner, but either still live with their parents or in student homes. Later in life, these dating LATs are found among individuals who co-house with friends. Even though one could make an argument that these individuals are "solo living" in terms of "not living with a partner in a multi-unit household" (cfr. the argument of Letablier & Wall, 2018) and can thus be considered as being single in that respect, both their partnership status and their living condition exclude them from being considered as single individuals in terms of the underlying dimensions.

TABLE 2 Theoretical framework identifying types of singlehood.

	In a relationship	Not in a relationship
Multiple person household (excluding a partner)	Dating LAT *Partnered, not solo*	Type 2: Co-housing single *Unpartnered, not solo*
One adult household (with or without children)	Type 1: Committed LAT-single *Partnered, but solo*	Type 3: Solo living single *Unpartnered, and solo*

Continuing along the first column, we identify the first actual type of singles. Building upon the LAT terminology, we call these individuals *committed LAT-singles*. This group accounts for people who are in a relationship and living solo in a one adult household. We refrain from placing this category among older adults even though empirical studies on LAT relationships seem to confirm that specifically older adults who have left a long-term marriage or cohabitation or who have been widowed are choosing for their independence in solo living while also being committed in a relationship (Benson & Coleman, 2016; Connidis et al., 2017; Wu & Brown, 2021). Following the exclusion of the previous category, one could argue here as well that the presence of a partner excludes these individuals from being categorized as being single. Nevertheless, we *do* consider them to be our first type of singles as they actually are living solo and are consequently considered as "single living." We argue that, although these people are in a relationship, the presence of a romantic partner is pretty much the only thing that distinguishes them from the fourth category of *solo living single*. For instance, as shown by Lyssens-Danneboom and Mortelmans (2014), many LAT-singles do not pool their resources, resulting in a household income that is more similar to that of solo living singles than to that of cohabiting couples. Since the burdens of running a household are not likely shared to a large degree when the partner is not part of that household, it is reasonable to assume that for many topics, it makes more sense to conceptualize these people as being single rather than not. Additionally, from a practical point of view, as authorities have no sight on the relationship dimension of individuals, the living conditions of individuals is adopted as a discriminating characteristic to identify couples from single individuals. In most cases, official statistics will even combine the living situation with marital status in order to make distinctions between single people (as non-married or non-registered cohabiters) and widow(er)s.

The second type, *co-housing single*, describes individuals in a multi-unit household who are not involved in a romantic relationship. Three realities come together in this category. A first group of co-housing singles are individuals who still live with their parents, but whose life course stage no longer warrants them to be considered as dependent children. These individuals potentially are no longer in (higher) education and have entered the labor market, with or without actual employment. It is important to note that this group does not necessary refer to young adults, as some people stay in the parental home until an advanced age to take care of (a) parent(s) in need. A second group of co-housing singles is not living with parents but with nonrelatives, usually friends. As the cost of housing can be considerable, co-housing is an often-used coping strategy to live in a neighborhood that would be financially untenable in a solo living situation. A third group of co-housing singles is widow(er)s who move in with their (adult) children after the death of their spouse. This is the reverse situation of the first group, as the main residence is now the home of the adult children rather than the parental home. In empirical research we rarely see this group identified as being single, even though we argue that "having been married" in itself cannot be a criterion to exclude individuals from being single.

The third and final type, *solo living single*, is comprised of people who score as single on both dimensions: being unpartnered and living alone. This category is beyond any doubt a group of individuals that is both legally and sociologically considered to be a single person.

However, the framework reveals that existing studies often reduce a larger group of single people to this category. For example, and as mentioned earlier, in some studies (e.g., Bergström et al., 2019; Sandström & Karlsson, 2019) widow(er)s are excluded from this category through the silent assumption that becoming single at an advanced age reserves these individuals for a separate category built on marital status only (i.e., widowhood).

TOWARDS AN INTEGRATED MEASUREMENT OF SINGLEHOOD

An important question that arises surrounding the proposed framework is its potential for operationalization. Although the theoretical foundation it offers can be useful in its own right, the proposition that it could aid empirical studies in terms of cross-national and cross-cohort comparability is a claim that warrants investigation. As such, we considered the applicability of our conceptual framework of singlehood to existing large-scale (longitudinal or repeated cross-sectional) datasets. In doing so, we aim to provide both existing and future research with a step-up to a more integrated study of singlehood by identifying lacunae which need to be addressed in order to be able to more comprehensively translate the framework into empirical approaches.

We considered the applicability of our categorization to five internationally comparative studies which collect indicators of household composition and relationship status over time: two retrospective datasets (fertility and family surveys (FFS) and harmonized histories), and three panel studies (Share, Pairfam, and SOEP) (for more details, see Appendix A). When it became clear that the empirical translation of our framework was impossible for most datasets, we reconsidered the full framework and employed a stepwise approach to identify with which level of detail being single can currently be studied using these datasets. Starting with the simplest approach to singlehood, we added complexity as far as some of the selected studies could handle it. With this strategy, we could reach three levels of complexity in our empirical translation of singlehood (summarized in Table 3).

Level 1. Marital status

On the first level, we consider the operationalization of singlehood in terms of marital status. This is the simplest operationalization of a person's relationship and living situation and this is possible with all selected datasets. This would also lead to the same results as when identifying partnership status with register data (Mortelmans & Pasteels, 2013). A detailed overview of the operationalization on this first level is presented in Table 4.

However, as stated above, this approach severely limits the interpretation of singlehood, as it merely allows for distinguishing single individuals from married and cohabiting couples. As there is no full information on relationships unless inferred from marital status, this implies a collapse of our framework to marital status and thus a conglomeration of Type 1, 2, and 3 singlehood. Furthermore, at this level, one can observe that married couples are automatically assumed to live together, which is, of course, not always the case (e.g., long-distance relationships). Furthermore, considering singlehood on this level tends to result in the exclusion of those with the marital status of widow(er), as neither their living condition (solo or multiple person household), nor the presence of a romantic partnership can be known. Due to this obscurity, widowhood is adopted as a separate category in the operationalization.

TABLE 3 Summary of operationalization levels and useable datasets.

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Operationalization of singlehood	Marital status (Type 1[a]+2 + 3)	Unpartnered singles (Type 2 + 3) & committed LAT-singles (Type 1)	Differentiation between Type 1, Type 2, and Type 3
Datasets[b] useable per level (tested)	Harmonized Histories Share FFS Pairfam GSOEP	Share FFS Pairfam GSOEP	Pairfam GSOEP[c]

[a]Type 1: Solo living + partner (committed LAT-single), Type 2: Not solo living + No partner (Co-housing single), Type 3: Solo living + No partner (Solo living single).
[b]Acronyms of datasets: Share, Survey of Health, Aging, and Retirement in Europe; FFS, Fertility and Family Survey; Pairfam, Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics; GSOEP, German Socio-economic Panel.
[c]Limited to the waves available in this panel.

TABLE 4 Level 1 operationalization: Marital status.

1	Married
2	Not married + cohabiting
3	Not married + not cohabiting
4	Widowed

TABLE 5 Level 2 operationalization: Identification of unpartnered singles and committed LAT-singles.

1	Married
2	Not married + cohabiting
3	TYPE 1: Solo living + partner (committed LAT-single)
4	TYPE 3: Solo living single
5	TYPE 3bis[a]: Solo living + no partner + widowed

[a]Type 3bis is a subtype of Type 3 limited to widows and widowers in datasets where this group cannot be joined with the main Type 3 group.

Level 2. Unpartnered singles and committed LAT-singles

The next level goes more into detail in terms of the residential situation for partnered individuals, by accounting for whether a partnered individual lives in a single or multiple person household through the question "do you live with your partner?" As such, this allows an extension to LAT relationships through the identification of committed LAT-singles, that is, people who live solo but have a partner (Type 1). The committed LAT-singles (Type 1) report having a partner without living with that partner in the same household (Table 5).

This increased granularity enables the identification of committed LAT-singles among widow(er)s, thus allowing for the incorporation of repartnered solo living widow(er)s in Type 1. It is, however, crucial to note that at this level, there is no differentiation in living situation for *unpartnered* individuals, because at this level we do not possess a question such as "who do you live with in your household?" As such, the group of single individuals who are not in a relationship is accumulated on this level, thus combining Type 2 and Type 3 of our framework.

TABLE 6 Level 3 operationalization: Empirical identification of all types of singlehood.

1	Married
2	Not married + cohabiting
3	Not married + not cohabiting + not solo living + partner (dating LAT)
4	TYPE 1: Solo living + partner (committed LAT-single)
5	TYPE 2: Not solo living + no partner (co-housing single)
6	TYPE 3: Solo living + no partner (solo living single)

As shown by Table 3, the Harmonized Histories data already reaches their limits at this level. As they do not contain information on LAT relationships, no differentiation can be made between the Type 1 singles and the Type 2 and 3 combination. Even though the underlying GGP survey could partially identify LAT relationships, the Harmonized Histories lack the details to apply the Level 2 operationalization.

Level 3. Full theoretical framework

The highest level of detail adds information on the actual living situation among single people and thus allows expansion to our full conceptual framework. More specifically, this level makes a distinction within the unpartnered single group by distinguishing between co-housing singles (Type 2) and solo living singles (Type 3), enabling a comparison among all three groups separately (Table 6).

Only two of the panel studies, Pairfam and GSOEP, have sufficient detail to reach the full capacity of our framework, owing to their meticulous measurement of household composition. In each wave and for each participating household, each panel obtains detailed information of who lives with whom.

At the same time, the panel studies show some important restrictions related to studying trends in singlehood. First, even though for Level 1 and Level 2 each panel's full retrospective union history information can be used, the level 3 operationalization requires information on the actual household composition on a biennial or annual basis, which implies that we can only account for the period that respondents participated in the panel. This restricts cohort comparisons, as this requires cohorts to be observed from age 14 until the date of interview, which is not the case due to the panels not running for sufficiently long periods. As such, at this highest level of detail, only comparisons across age would be possible. Second, and consequentially, only a limited subset can be used from each panel. As Pairfam runs for 13 years, this is the maximum range of singlehood histories that can be considered at Level 3. Consequently, as the youngest start age is 14 and the oldest start age 39, the youngest respondents would not even be observed until the age threshold of 30 years whereas for the older respondents, this implies (modest to large) left censoring. Third, the GSOEP panel shows an additional restriction. In the question module on the household grid, GSOEP assigns the role of "head of household" to one of the household members and then identifies all household members in their relationship with this household head. As a consequence, we cannot identify all co-housing singles in the household. For example, a cohabiting partner of a child of the head of household cannot be identified, leading to a false identification of the child as a co-housing single. When we applied our framework to the GSOEP data, it turned out that 37% of the GSOEP respondents could not be used in a Level 3 operationalization. In addition, for the selective group of heads of households, we run into the same issues as with the Pairfam panel: the youngest respondents we would be able to follow were 17 years old at the start of the panel (1985), and the oldest started to be followed at 97 years old.

For those 20 years and younger, we can start following 4.2% of all heads of households, implying 95.8% left censoring (if we accept the start age of 20 as non-censored in this case). A fourth restriction is the attrition of respondents when using panel data. For a long-running panel such as GSOEP, we find that the average participation range of respondents starting at 20 years or younger in the panel amounts to 6.94 years, with only 13 (out of 977) participating 30 years or longer.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It has become clear that relationship patterns are evolving across the globe (Mortelmans et al., 2016). For one, traditional marriage patterns have been complemented with unmarried cohabitation and living apart together (LAT) relationships, which have challenged the idea that all romantic couples live together (Pasteels et al., 2015; Perelli-Harris & Lyons-Amos, 2015). For another, we recently see indications that singlehood is rising in many countries. This evolution can partly be explained by aging societies where policies to keep people at home lead to more older adults living solo. However, aging does not explain the entire pattern, as it is clear that the rise in singlehood is evident across all age groups and pertains to a shift in (urban) lifestyles as well (Kislev, 2019a).

This article aims to bring conceptual clarity to whom we consider to be single. Currently, two approaches are generally found in the literature. Either a single individual is defined based on their living situation, using terms like "solo living" or "one person households," or being single refers to "the absence of a romantic relationship." Sometimes, both dimensions are collapsed, assuming that those who live solo are also unpartnered. As such, singlehood research tends to risk considering single people as a homogenous group, despite the very different experiences and consequences of "living alone" versus "being unpartnered." With our conceptual framework, we integrate both dimensions rather than ignoring them. Integrating the residential situation with the relationship status results in three types of singlehood: the committed LAT-single (Type 1), the co-housing single (Type 2) and the solo living single (Type 3). Only Type 3 combines the defining element of both dimensions: having no relationship *and* living solo. Awareness of these distinctions can be a valuable tool in refining the language around and conceptual approaches to singlehood, across all disciplines. Of course, while the proposed framework provides a step-up in this regard, the main message remains the need to clearly define how being single is considered, both in and outside of academic research. Focusing on a single dimension then remains useful (e.g., governmental projections on single adult households), while limiting incorrect generalizations concerning the term "single."

A next aim of the paper was to explore the applicability of the conceptual framework to empirical data, or, in other words, to gauge with which level of detail the incidence of singlehood currently can be measured. Depending on the data one has, either the residential dimension or the relationship dimension is available (with the first clearly outweighing the second in terms of available datasets and observations). In our exploration, we consciously chose a life-course approach by considering comparative, longitudinal data with relationship histories. Although there are undoubtedly small, specialized, cross-sectional datasets which allow the translation of the framework into empirical analyses, the core notion behind our framework is to aid family scientists in looking beyond country borders and across time to see how the share of single people evolves across birth cohorts and between different countries. This requirement poses substantial challenges to the datasets to which we attempted to apply our framework, which we demonstrated by using a stepwise implementation. At the lowest level, marital status determines singlehood, meaning that marriage and cohabitation together with widowhood are the basis for relationship histories. As neither the living condition nor the relationship status of singlehood can be unambiguously determined, an individual is considered to be single when no

"official" partnership is observed. Singlehood is the "filler state"; when no partnership or partner bereavement is observed, the individual is assumed to be single. The second level offers a small step beyond marital status, as some studies also ask respondents whether they have a partner with whom they do not live. This allows separating episodes of Type 1 (committed LAT-single) from the combined group of Types 2 (cohousing single) and 3 (solo living single). None of the retrospective studies allow identifying all three groups of singles, with especially the cohousing single (Type 2) proving empirically difficult to identify across time. This type can only be found in panel studies by reconstructing the total household composition. The exploration of the different levels shows that shifts across birth cohorts and across countries currently cannot be comprehensively studied, and that the full framework cannot (yet) be compared across birth cohorts, as the available empirical information is not (yet) sufficient.

Notwithstanding the contribution of this article in creating a new singles framework and considering its empirical applicability, we acknowledge that our endeavor is still a first start and that several limitations need to be tackled in the future. First, we have only touched upon the isolated, individual situation without considering important variation within the group of singles, of which gender and parenthood are two important elements. The experience of singlehood differs between men and women and the distribution across the three types will most likely also differ across men's and women's life courses. Furthermore, by focusing exclusively on the relationship and the residential dimension, the element of parenthood was ignored. A subsequent exercise should therefore consider the three types of singlehood with and without children (Bernardi & Mortelmans, 2018; Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018). This could also benefit the domain of lone parenthood, where currently too little is known on cohousing (e.g., the boomerang effect) or LAT-single parenthood (Albertini et al., 2018; Mortelmans et al., 2020).

A second limitation is the focus we put on the status of being single, rather than their lived experience. We approach singlehood from a demographic standpoint, by trying to identify a clear, measurable status of an individual. From qualitative studies (e.g., Hill, 2020; Lahad, 2017), we know that the lived experience of the single population incorporates much more than "the status of singlehood" claims. In this respect, the work of Stein (1981) shows that we also need to take into account involuntary singlehood, referring to people who are single because of external elements or circumstances. These individuals either have the will to marry but are unable to find a partner (involuntary-temporary), or are willing to marry, but have stopped searching (involuntary-stable). Meanwhile, voluntary singlehood is a state of singlehood where a person makes a conscious choice to be single for a certain period of time (voluntary-temporary) or indefinitely (voluntary-stable) (Bellani et al., 2017). These dimensions could certainly enrich our proposed framework. In quantitative research, the two questions needed to operationalize our framework ("Are you the only adult living in this household?" and "Are you currently involved in a romantic relationship?") could be supplemented with a third question measuring the self-identification of being single ("Do you consider yourself to be single?"). Especially in gray singlehood, we expect that many older adults would not immediately identify with being single. The same can be expected from individuals in a LAT relationship who refer to the relationship dimension to identify themselves as partnered, even though the government considers them as solo living adults (sometimes even providing social benefits for this group), and their lifestyle might have more in common with their solo living single peers than their cohabiting ones.

Third, it might be insightful to apply the framework to episodes of singlehood. In one's relationship history, it could matter a great deal if five years of singlehood is lived in one long episode, or rather in five shorter episodes across several years. For some, singlehood is a stable period in their life, whereas for others it marks an intermediate state in a turbulent relationship history. Fourth, research is needed on the legal status of single people in relation to our

framework and more precisely on the legal use of the term "single." We have repeatedly referred to marital status as the basis of our framework (Level 1) but in official statistics, one person households are sometimes referred to as single person households. The relation between our empirical framework and the legal use of the term "single" is currently under researched but has important implications for time series and trends.

Despite these limitations, we believe that using a comprehensive framework to define what it means to be single is a first step in integrating the field of singlehood studies (DePaulo, 2014; DePaulo & Morris, 2005). The framework we have proposed in this article points to distinct work that lies ahead. First, the operationalization of singlehood in current datasets partly revealed some age discrimination, as widowhood is considered as a clear status in itself without looking either at the residential situation or the relationship dimension. As such, most datasets force researchers to keep this group apart, as too little information is present to include them in any of our types. We could call this the "Sex and the City" bias, whereby single people are portrayed as a young and urban phenomenon. For bereaved older individuals, the image seems to exist that they grieve and never enter the relationship market again. We do not take any position here on whether or not this is intentional, but it is clear that a mature field of singlehood studies needs to take into account singlehood across the entire life course. A similar development is observed in the field of divorce studies, where research on "gray divorce" shows that the relationship history does not end at middle age, and that many family dynamics are experienced at more advanced ages as well (Mortelmans, 2023). The framework should then be seen as an invitation to look at all three types of singlehood in older ages, as gray singlehood is currently under-explored and difficult to measure.

A second challenge the framework points to is the couple-centeredness of current retrospective relationship histories. When retrospective modules ask for relationship histories, they concentrate on exactly that: relationship histories. All periods in between these relationships are considered a residual category. We realize the burden for respondents to reconstruct histories from memory, especially when studies (such as the Survey of Health, Aging, and Retirement in Europe) not only collect data on relationship histories, but also on work and housing trajectories across the life course. However, our typology simultaneously shows that singlehood is not simply a residual category in one's life course. These are substantial periods with large diversities across social groups that remain undocumented when only considered as absence of marriage or cohabitation.

Next to the innovative theoretical work to further develop the framework we presented in this article, methodological work is needed to determine how periods of singlehood can be (actively) measured retrospectively in order to obtain complete histories of both relationships and singlehood. These histories will allow for a more detailed analysis across the life course and between countries around the globe. This work needs to go hand in hand with subsequent theoretical work on being single related to parenthood and the extent to which our typology is both age- and gender-neutral. Identifying three types of singlehood is clearly just a one step on the long road of singlehood studies.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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APPENDIX A

For the operationalization chapter, we used the questionnaires and user manuals of five studies: two retrospective datasets (FFS and the harmonized histories) and three panels (Share, Pairfam, and GSOEP). From two of these panels (Share and pairfam) we looked into their retrospective questionnaire on relationship histories.

The FFS were conducted in the 1990s (1988–2000) in 24 countries as part of the UNECE population program. National representative samples of individuals were drawn, with birth cohorts ranging from 1922 to 1982. The Harmonized Histories (Perelli-Harris et al., 2010) is a comparative dataset from surveys conducted in 18 countries. Researchers from the Nonmarital Childbearing Network have performed the standardization mostly originating from the Generations and Gender Surveys, but additional surveys have been added throughout the years. We used the union histories of birth cohorts predominantly from 1920 to 2000. The Survey of Health, Aging, and Retirement in Europe (Share) is a panel survey of individuals aged 50 or older from 28 European countries and Israel. The panel started in 2004 and runs bi-annually. For this paper, we looked at wave 3 and wave 7 where a retrospective partnership history was included (Börsch-Supan, 2022a, 2022b). Given the specific sample among individuals aged 50+, the majority of the birth cohorts are from 1900 to 1970.

The last two studies differ from the previous as they are restricted to one country (Germany). We decided to adopt both the GSOEP and the Pairfam given the detailed information both panels have on relationship histories. The German Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP) is a representative panel survey that has been running since 1984 (Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP), 2022). The panel runs annually with several refresher samples to keep the survey representative. The German Family Panel Pairfam ("Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics") (Brüderl et al., 2022) started in 2008 on a nationwide random sample of more than 12,000 persons of birth cohorts 1971–1973, 1981–1983 and 1991–1993. A restocking and refreshment sample in wave 11 has added the birth cohort 2001–2003. The study ended after 13 waves and will be integrated in the new panel study Freda (Bujard et al., 2022).