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'Kinlessness', social connectedness, and subjective wellbeing in Europe

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This paper examines the association between family structure and subjective wellbeing, by focusing on the moderating effect of social connectedness. We compare middle-aged and older adults across four family types: those with both a partner and children, those with a partner but not children, those with children but not partner, and those without partner and children ('kinless'). We use data from five waves of European Social Survey (2012-2020) and estimate ordered logistic regression models on the odds of having high levels of happiness and life satisfaction in 35 European countries. The results show that middle-aged and older adults who lack partners exhibit lower levels of happiness and life satisfaction compared to partnered individuals, while the absence of children is not associated with these outcomes. The wellbeing disadvantage of unpartnered men diminishes according to their level of social connectedness, and such moderating effect is driven by those living in Northern and Western European countries. The results lend support to the mitigation hypothesis, indicating that the negative impact of having no partners and no children on subjective wellbeing is weaker for people who are more strongly connected with social relationships in less family-centered countries.

Keywords: Kinlessness, Childless, Unpartnered, Social networks, Social connectedness, Subjective wellbeing.

Introduction

In contemporary European societies, demographic shifts, such as decreasing marriage and fertility rates, have led to profound transformations in family structure. An increasing proportion of middle-aged and older adults now has – and will have in the future – fewer or no family members (Verdery et al., 2019). These demographic trends, primarily affecting the availability of "nuclear" family ties (i.e., partners and children), can pose unique challenges related to wellbeing and the availability of informal care in later life. Previous research consistently shows that middle-aged and older adults without partners and children have worse physical and mental health, as well as a higher probability of living in retirement homes and reporting unmet needs compared to partnered older parents and parents (e.g., Arpino et al., 2022; Margolis et al., 2022).

Nonetheless, childless and unpartnered adults are not necessarily ageing alone, nor are they devoid of sources of support and fulfillment (Carr, 2019). Middle aged and older adults who lack close family ties may rely on alternative networks of relationships, such as friendships and extended family members, that may be good substitutes in terms of support and companionship (Mair, 2019). Apart from any difference in the size of their networks (Margolis et al., 2022), unpartnered childless adults may value their social connections outside the family more, compared to their counterparts who have partners and children. Yet, contemporary research focusing on the absence of close kin has hitherto provided only indirect evidence on whether the wellbeing disadvantages of kinless adults vary according to their social connectedness. Thus, the current study aims to explore the moderating role of social connectedness in the association between 'kinlessness' – defined as the lack of a partner and children – and subjective wellbeing among middle-aged and older Europeans.

Methods

Our empirical analysis is based on cross-sectional data for 35 European countries from the rounds 6 (2012/2013), 7 (2014/2015), 8 (2016/2017), 9 (2018/2019), and 10 (2020/2022) of the European Social Survey (ESS). Rounds 1-5 are excluded because items regarding social connectedness are not fully comparable. The sample selected for this study includes adults aged 50-90 living in Northern (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden), Western (Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany, France, Ireland, United Kingdom), Eastern (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Hungary, Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Poland, Russia, Ukraine, North Macedonia, Slovenia, Serbia, Croatia, Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro) and Southern (Italy, Greece, Portugal, Cyprus, and Spain) European countries (n=56,207 men and 66,468 women). We thus exclude Israel, as it is the only non-European country, and use the full-information sample, excluding respondents with missing values in either the dependent (0.9% men and 1.2% women) or independent (5.1% men and 5.9% women) variables. The final sample includes 52,811 men and 61,911 women.

Our dependent variables are happiness and life satisfaction, as reported in the ESS based on responses to the questions: "Taking all things together, how happy would you say you are?" and "All things considered, how satisfied are you with your life as a whole nowadays?". The answer categories range from 0 extremely unhappy/ dissatisfied to 10 extremely happy/ satisfied.

The central independent variable in this study refers to family structure, distinguishing between (a) having both a partner and child(ren), (b) having a partner but no children, (c) having child(ren) but no partner, (d) having no partner and no children. The respondents in the latter category were considered kinless. The identification of individuals lacking partner is based on information regarding

respondents' marital status and family members living in the household (household grid). Never married, widowed, and separated respondents who have no partners living in the household are categorized as those lacking a partner. The presence or absence of children is derived from information on household grid at the time of the interview and retrospective information on whether respondents ever had a child living in the household.

Our measure of social connectedness is based on three questions regarding the number of close people and the frequency of social meetings and social activities. Respondents are asked "how many people with whom you can discuss intimate and personal matters?" (range from 1 "none" to 7 "ten people or more"), "how often do you meet socially with friends, relatives or work colleagues?" (range from 1 "never" to 7 "daily"), "Compared to other people of your age, how often would you say you take part in social activities?" (answer categories ranging from 1 "Much less than most" to 5 "Much more than most"). These indicators have been used in previous research to measure individual engagement in social networks as part of the broader concept of social capital (Halman & Luijkx, 2006). By applying factor analysis on the polychoric correlation matrix between these three ordinal items, scores were calculated for each individual in such a way that high scores indicate high levels of connectedness.

Control variables included in the analysis are: individual age (range = 50 - 104), country dummies, employment status (working or not working), household income quintiles (calculated on the overall sample), migration background, and having health limitation(s). Health issues are measured through a question on whether individuals are hampered in daily activities by illness, disability, infirmity or mental problems. Migration background distinguishes between respondents born in the country of the interview, those born abroad, and those born in country whose parents were born abroad.

Due to the ordinal nature of the happiness and life satisfaction variables, we estimate ordered logistic regression models, assuming that a latent cardinal measure of the dependent variable is associated with family structure and the personal characteristics of middle-aged and older adults. The latent cardinal measure is mapped into the observed ordinal scales, i.e. happiness and life satisfaction.

Results

Table 1 presents results from ordered logistic regression models on happiness and life satisfaction scales. Among both men and women, there are no significant differences between those who have partners but not children and those who have both. Thus, middle aged and older adults who have a partner but not children exhibit similar levels of happiness and life satisfaction compared to those with both parents and children. Conversely, lacking a partner is associated with a significant reduction of subjective wellbeing. Middle-aged and older men with children but not partners have an odd 0.48 and 0.63 times smaller to report high scores of happiness and life satisfaction, compared to those with both partner and children. Similarly, women with children but not partners are 0.55 and 0.66 times less likely to report high scores of happiness and life satisfaction compared to partnered mothers. The happiness and life satisfaction scores associated with kinless men and women are comparable to the ones of unpartnered individuals with children. This result indicates that the lack of a partner is the main driver of wellbeing disparities across family types.

Figures 1 presents the average marginal effects (AME) of having children but not partners and of being kinless compared to have both partners and children on the probability of reporting high levels (above 7) of happiness, according to social connectedness. We do not report estimates for individuals with partners but no children, as they show no significant differences compared to those with both

partners and children (reference line at zero). For men's happiness (Figure 1), the AMEs of lacking a partner but having children (compared to having both) reduce from -17 p.p. (C.I. = -18 – -15) to -7 p.p. (C.I. = -10 – -5) according to their level of social connectedness with other relationships. The estimated AMEs are similar for men without both partners and children, varying from -18 p.p. (C.I. = -20 – -16) to -5 p.p. (-9 – -2). On the contrary, among middle-aged women the AMEs of being kinless vs. having both partners and children do not vary significantly according to their level of social connectedness, indicating that the wellbeing disadvantage of kinless women is not mitigated by their levels of social connectedness. In addition, the happiness gap between partnered women and unpartnered mothers changes only slightly according to social connectedness, with an AME of -12 p.p. (-13 – -11) for those with a low level of social connectedness and a AME of -8 p.p. (-10 – -6) for those with a high level of social connectedness. We formally test gender differences including three— way interactions and the results show that the moderating effects of social connectedness are significantly smaller for women than for men. We find similar results for life satisfaction (not shown in this abstract).

Table 1. Ordered logistic regression models on happiness and life satisfaction.

	Happiness		Life satisfaction	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
	O.R.	O.R.	O.R.	O.R.
Family structure				
(Ref. Partner and children)				
Partner, no child(ren)	0.99	0.95	1.03	0.96
Child(ren), no partner	0.48**	0.55**	0.63**	0.66**
No partner, no children	0.47**	0.54**	0.65**	0.68**
Observations	52,811	61,911	52,811	61,911

Note: Control variables include: Age, Age^2, Education, Migration background, Employment, Income quintiles, Social connectedness, 35 country dummies, 5 dummies for survey round (from 6 to 10), and 10 intercepts for each cut point in happiness and life satisfaction scales. Results weighted for the post-stratified design weights. **p<0.01; *p<0.05.

Figure 1. Average marginal effects of having children but not partners and of having no partner and no children compared to have both partners and children on the probability of reporting a happiness score above 7, according to social connectedness.
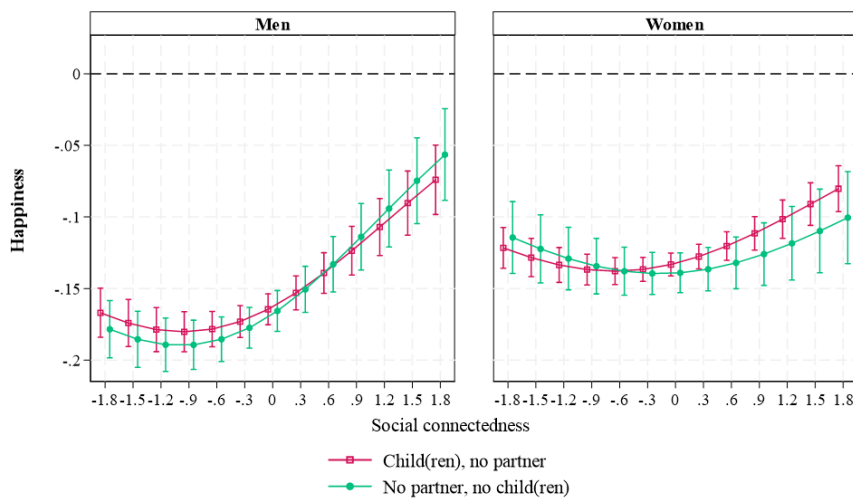

Table 2 presents separate analyses for two country clusters distinguishing between Western-Northern (less family centered) and Eastern-Southern (more family centered) European countries. In each

country group, middle-aged and older adults without partners (whether they have children or not) exhibit lower levels of happiness compared to their partnered counterparts. There are substantial cross-country variations in the moderating effect of social connectedness. Interactions between family structure and social connectedness are significant in Northern / Western countries but not in Southern / Eastern European countries. Among both men and women living in Northern and Western countries, the wellbeing disadvantages of having children but not partners (compared to having both) diminish according with the level of social connectedness, whereas the odds ratios associated with these interactions are close to one for those living in Southern and Eastern European countries. In Northern/ Western but not in Southern/ Eastern country group, middle-aged and older men are able to offset the absence of partners and children with other social relationships. We formally test country differences including three-way interactions between family structure, social connectedness and country cluster. The results confirm that the moderating effect of social connectedness is smaller in Southern / Eastern than in Northern / Western country cluster. These results are similar when analyzing life satisfaction.

Table 2. Ordered logistic regression models on happiness in Northern/Western and Southern/Eastern country clusters.

	Northern / Western countries		Southern / Eastern countries	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
	O.R.	O.R.	O.R.	O.R.
Happiness				
Family structure (Ref. Partner and children)				
Partner, no child(ren)	0.99	1.03	0.93	0.81**
Child(ren), no partner	0.43**	0.46**	0.51**	0.62**
No partner, no children	0.48**	0.47**	0.42**	0.59**
Social connectedness	1.75**	1.85**	1.90**	1.92**
Family structure X Social connectedness				
Partner, no child(ren) X Social	1.06	0.96	0.99	1.05
Child(ren), no partner X Social	1.36**	1.21**	1.11	1.04
No partner, no children X Social	1.47**	1.08	1.08	1.05
Observations	29,061	30,130	23,750	31,781

Note: control variables are those presented in Table 1. **p<0.01; *p<0.05.

Conclusion

We show that the wellbeing disadvantage of kinless men decline according to their levels of social connectedness in less family-centered countries where people place greater value on relationships outside the "nuclear" family. These alternative sources of support and companionship help mitigate the wellbeing disadvantages of kinless men but not for women. This gender gap may be because widowhood, which is more common among unpartnered women, is harder to compensate for through other relationships than divorce or separation, which is more prevalent for unpartnered men.

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