Singlehood: preconceptions versus experiences

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Marie Bergström* and Géraldine Vivier*

Intimate life consists of periods of couplehood and singlehood. We tend to think of the latter as transient and transitional, a waiting period before entering a new partnership, which is considered the norm. But what do the data say? Basing their analysis on both quantitative and qualitative material from the EPIC survey, Marie Bergström and Géraldine Vivier discuss what proportion of people are not in a couple at a given time and how these periods of singlehood are perceived.

Being single—the situation of people who, temporarily or lastingly, are not (or no longer) in a couple relationship—is common today. It is frequent in early adulthood because the age at first union formation has risen [1] and even more so at older ages because the increase in divorce and separation since the 1970s is associated with episodes of temporary or lasting singlehood. In the 2013–2014 EPIC survey in metropolitan France (Box 1), 1 in 5 people aged 26–65 reported not having a partner (21%), and 1 in 2 reported at least one period spent without a partner (lasting 1 year or more) since their first serious intimate relationship. Knowing they are one of many, single people see their situation as commonplace and unexceptional nowadays. However, a qualitative follow-up survey on a small group of respondents shows that couplehood remains the norm and that singlehood is not socially valued [2]. While most people aged 26–65 have a partner, unpartnered people's attitudes towards singlehood depend partly on its frequency in their own social environment. They see it more positively when singles are numerous in their social circle but less so when they feel they are in a minority. These attitudes and the aspirations that follow are also anchored in experiences of singlehood that vary by age, sex, and socio-economic group.

Singlehood among women and men

Between ages 26 and 65, the proportion of singles is similar for both sexes (21%), but their relationship trajectories are very different (Figure 1). Men form their first relationship at a later age than women do, and a higher proportion are single at young ages. Women, on the other hand, form couples earlier but also become single again earlier. Beyond age 30, a time when being in a couple is at its height for both sexes (the rate of singlehood is very low at this time of life), trends in separation, divorce, and widowhood are different for men and women. From age 40, the rate of singlehood starts increasing for women and rises continuously from then on. Men's trajectories are less age-sensitive. Less frequently widowed than women [3], men also enter a new relationship after a separation more often and more rapidly.

Living as a single is not the same thing as living alone, although the two notions are often confused (Box 2). A large share (42%) of the singles who responded to the EPIC survey live with other people, such as children or

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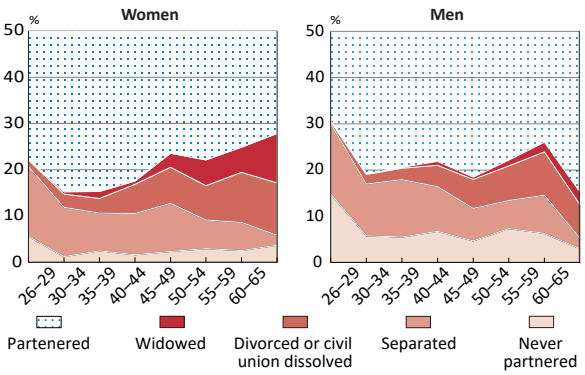
Figure 1. Rates and types of singlehood by age group and sex (%)



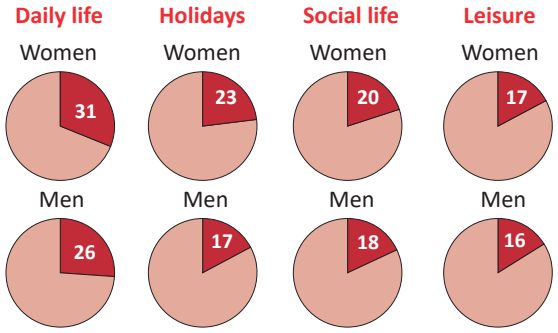
M. Bergström, G. Vivier, *Population & Societies* no. 584, INED, December 2020.

Interpretation: At ages 26–29, 22% of women do not have a partner or are not in a serious intimate relationship; 7% have separated from a cohabiting partner.

Coverage: Individuals aged 26–65 living in metropolitan France.

Source: INED–INSEE, EPIC survey, 2013–2014.

Figure 2. Proportions of singles reporting a negative impact of living without a partner in 4 areas of life (%)



M. Bergström, G. Vivier, *Population & Societies* no. 584, INED, December 2020.

Interpretation: Of women without a partner, 31% report a negative impact of singlehood on their daily life.

Coverage: Individuals aged 26–65 without a partner and living in metropolitan France.

Source: INED–INSEE, EPIC survey, 2013–2014.

flatmates, for example. Likewise, singlehood does not necessarily signify an absence of intimate relationships. While having no partner or serious romantic attachment, almost one-third of singles aged 26–65 reported having one or more casual relationships (29%).[1]

When asked about their experience of singlehood, only a minority of singles report that it has a negative impact on their daily or social life, holidays, or leisure (Figure 2).[2] Whatever the dimension concerned, both women and men most often consider that it 'makes no difference'. Lone parents living with children under 15—mainly mothers[3]—report more frequently than childless people that life without a partner complicates daily living or holidays, but a majority still reply that singlehood makes no difference or makes it easier.

Singlehood and couplehood: socially contrasting experiences

Singlehood is more common among low-income groups. This is the case for both sexes but less markedly for women. The proportion of unpartnered people decreases gradually with increasing socio-economic status (Figure 3). Among manual workers, 29% of men and 24% of women are single; in higher-level occupations, these proportions are respectively 13% and 18%. However, the previous trajectories of these single people reveal differences by sex. Among men, a large share of single manual workers, clerical workers, and farmers have never had a partner; but among women, single clerical and manual workers more often have previous experience of a union that ended in divorce or widowhood. Men are affected by social differentials in *access* to partnership, while for women these differentials mainly concern the *exit* from relationships. Spatial inequalities, such as the geographical isolation of farmers, and occupational health inequalities that increase the frequency of widowhood among women in lower socio-economic groups also shape these contrasting union trajectories. When asked whether singlehood is a choice,[4] more women than men (46% vs. 34%) and more clerical and manual workers than people in higher-level occupations (43% vs. 33%) state that 'it's a choice'. Less happy with life as a single, the latter more often report that they sometimes or often feel excluded because they do not have a partner. The lower prevalence of singlehood in the higher social classes seems to coincide with a stronger relationship norm. Conversely, among the working class, where singlehood, lone-parent families, and lifelong singlehood are more common, people in these situations may feel less stigmatized and excluded.

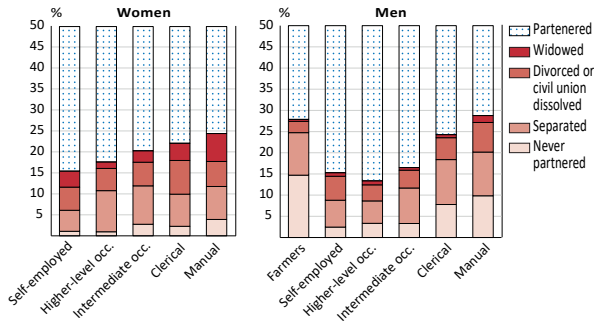
(1) Question asked to individuals with no partner or serious intimate relationship: 'Which of these situations applies to you? 1) *You are not in any relationship*; 2) *You are in a lasting casual relationship* 3) *You have casual relationships from time to time.*'

(2) 'For you, regarding daily life, going on holiday, etc., being single (1) *makes it easier*, (2) *makes it more difficult*, (3) *makes no difference*, (4) *not concerned*, (5) *don't know.*'

(3) At ages 26–65, 22% of single women (vs. just 6% of men) live with at least one child under age 15.

(4) Question: [Regarding singlehood] 'You would say that: *it's a choice / it's not really a choice, but the situation suits me / I would like to have a serious intimate relationship / I would like to have a relationship, or more than one, without committing myself.*'

Figure 3. Forms of singlehood by sex and occupational category (%)



M. Bergström, G. Vivier, *Population & Societies* no. 584, INED, December 2020.

Note: The sample contained too few female farmers to be included in the analyses.

Interpretation: In 2013, 28% of male farmers were not in a union or a serious intimate relationship; 15% reported never having had a relationship of this type.

Coverage: Individuals aged 26–65 living in metropolitan France.

Source: INED–INSEE, EPIC survey, 2013–2014.

Emancipatory singlehood: the experience of female clerical and manual workers

The social divide in the way singlehood is experienced and judged is especially pronounced for women. Female manual and clerical workers much more often see their singlehood as a choice (50%) than women in higher-level occupations (25%). They also more often say that living without a partner 'makes no difference' in their daily life (43% vs. 34%), while more women in higher-level occupations say that being single makes their everyday life 'more difficult' (42% vs. 30% of female clerical or manual workers). These differences become even greater for mothers. Single mothers in the higher social classes much more often report difficulties in being single than those who are manual or clerical workers; it is working class women who adapt most easily to life without a partner—single mothers included, despite their risk of entering poverty [5]. This finding may seem surprising, but its logic was made clear by the female clerical and manual workers interviewed for the qualitative survey. First, they highlight the continuity of their role and of their domestic and childrearing duties. With or without a partner, they have to 'get organized', 'do everything', and 'manage everything'. Next, they point up the decision-making autonomy that comes with singlehood; they are now free to make their own spending and childrearing decisions, admittedly with constraints but without being held to account. Money management is emblematic of this new autonomy. While partnered women in higher-level occupations are also affected by an unequal division of parenting and domestic tasks, they have greater personal financial independence than women with lower social status [6]. Freedom to manage one's budget without having to negotiate is a more significant difference and a greater gain for female clerical and manual workers than for the others. And it is this decision-making autonomy, gained or regained, that they are attached to.

Dreading singlehood in the early 30s

It is young people aged 30–34, both men and women alike, who express the most ambivalent, if not negative, feelings about their singlehood. Fewer report choosing singlehood (22% vs. 46% among all singles aged 26–65), and a larger proportion sometimes or often feel excluded because they are not in a couple (40% vs. 32%). Around age 30, singlehood is burdensome. As mentioned earlier, at this time of life the rate of singlehood is very low, and patterns of sociability are evolving. As single people see their friends forming relationships, they become more strongly aware of their minority status, and personal and social pressure becomes more intense: 56% of 30- to 34-year-olds have already felt that friends or family were trying to match them with someone (vs. 38% for all singles), and 18% have led their family to believe that they have a partner (vs. 11%). People in their 30s are also the most likely to look actively for a potential partner, particularly through online dating sites. While only 7% of women and men enter their first cohabiting relationship after age 30, and around 1% after age 40, turning 30 is a milestone, with the risk and fear that temporary and reversible singlehood might become lasting or even permanent, a situation perceived as miserable.

Box 1. The EPIC survey (Étude des parcours individuels et conjugaux)

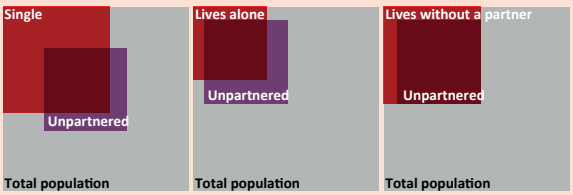
The EPIC survey of individual and partnership trajectories was conducted by INED and INSEE in 2013–2014 among 7,825 people aged 26–65 living in metropolitan France. Asking respondents about their 'partnerships or serious intimate relationships', the survey retraced their relationship histories before obtaining details about their current situation, whether single or in a union. By not using the legal category of *célibataire* (single), which no longer defines people in relation to their union status, this approach captures contemporary forms of singlehood and how it is experienced. The lives of single people, their aspirations, and the attitudes of family and friends were covered in a specific question module and a qualitative follow-up survey comprising semi-structured interviews with 42 respondents not in a relationship at the time of the survey.

* The EPIC survey was conducted with the support of CNAF (Caisse nationale des allocations familiales), DREES (Direction de la recherche, de l'évaluation, des études et des statistiques), ANR (Agence nationale de la recherche, CECHIC project: Corpus pour l'étude de cent ans d'histoire du couple en France), and iPOPs ('Individuals, Populations, Societies' Laboratory of Excellence).

Box 2. How to measure singlehood?

The term *célibat* (single) in French has different meanings, and the notion of singlehood is measured in different ways. This article is based on a self-reported definition: someone is single if they report not having a partner. In 2013, this was the case for 21% of people aged 26–65. Three other indicators overlap to some extent with the 'unpartnered' status defined in this way:

Figure 4. Four indicators of *célibat*



M. Bergström, G. Vivier, *Population & Societies* no. 584, INED, December 2020.

Interpretation: The areas are proportional to the share of singles (35%), people living alone (16%), people living without a partner (28%), and people reporting not having a partner (21%) in the total population (100%). The intersecting areas show the overlap between these categories.

Coverage: Individuals aged 26–65 living in metropolitan France.

Source: INED–INSEE, EPIC survey, 2013–2014.

1) 'Single' marital status signifies the legal status of having never been married. It was used for many years as an indicator of being partnerless, but with the spread of consensual unions, it is no longer a reliable indicator of an individual's actual partnership status. In 2013, 35% of people aged 26–35 were single in the legal sense, but only a fraction of them did not have a partner (Figure 4).

2) The proportion of individuals living alone is a second widely used indicator. The growing share of one-person households clearly reflects the increase in single living, although the indicator remains imperfect. It says nothing about people who have no partner but are not living alone, such as lone-parent families and roommates. In 2013, only 16% of people aged 26–65 actually lived alone.

3) 'Not living with a partner'—as opposed to living with a partner under the same roof, used increasingly by public statistics to define union status—is a third indicator. While it is more precise than the other measures, it overlooks non-cohabiting relationships that concern a non-negligible minority of men and women, notably at young ages and after a separation [7]. Among the 26–65 age group, 28% were not living with a partner in 2013.

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Abstract

Cross-analysis of the EPIC survey (Étude des parcours individuels et conjugaux, 2013–2014) and the qualitative follow-up survey on singlehood confirms that episodes of singlehood are now common and often occur more than once over the life course. It also sheds light on the different types of singlehood and the contrasting ways it is experienced by sex, social group, and age. In a society where the norm of being in a relationship remains strong, being single is accepted more easily when it is more frequent in one's own social circle. This is the case for women, particularly clerical and manual workers, for whom it offers greater independence. Singlehood is perceived more negatively, however, when it deviates more markedly from the norm in an individual's social environment. Singles in their 30s, an age where couplehood is predominant, stand out as a group whose experience of singlehood is particularly difficult and stigmatized.

Keywords

singlehood, living without a partner, couple relationships, norm, life course, gender

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