

The Emergence of Singlehood Studies: Why Singlehood Demands a Life-Course Lens

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Western partnership patterns have shifted in two waves: first, away from marriage towards cohabitation and non-residential relationships such as LAT; and second, towards a growing share of adults spending significant portions of their lives without a partner at all. For some, this is a brief transitional phase, but increasingly singlehood becomes a more prominent feature of the adult life course, sometimes developing into a long-term identity. Yet for much of the twentieth century, family scholarship treated singlehood as a residual category. Adults without a partner were framed as “not yet partnered” or absorbed into heterogeneous comparison groups that attracted little theoretical or empirical attention. Even as family research broadened from marriage to partnering more generally, singlehood itself rarely received sustained attention in its own right.

This keynote argues that singlehood has now emerged as a substantive field within family sociology and social demography, and that life-course methodology is not an optional addition to this field but its necessary foundation. Drawing on panel data from Understanding Society, pairfam and HILDA, as well as Belgian population register data, I show that singlehood is neither a homogeneous group nor a static life-course trajectory. It encompasses diverse pathways, ranging from never-partnered adulthood to post-dissolution trajectories, widowhood in later life, and short but recurring spells between relationships. Research suggests that these different forms of singlehood are associated with distinct patterns of health, economic well-being and housing outcomes that cross-sectional data cannot adequately capture.

To understand such differences, we need longitudinal insight into the timing, duration, sequencing and recurrence of singlehood across the life course. The rise of singlehood studies, therefore, marks more than the recognition of a previously neglected life-course status. It challenges family scholars to rethink adulthood not from the normative ideal of stable partnership, but from the broader reality of relational turbulence, heterogeneity and changing life-course configurations.