



# Pathways into living alone in mid-life: Diversity and policy implications



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 19 September 2012

Received in revised form 15 January 2013

Accepted 10 February 2013

### Keywords:

Living alone

Mid-life

Pathways

Policy implications

Baby-boom cohort

Partnership trajectory

## ABSTRACT

This paper adopts a life course approach to investigate the pathways into living alone in mid-life in Britain and how these vary by gender and socio-economic status. The rise in the proportion of people living alone over the past three decades has been well documented. However, much of the focus of the existing literature has been on either people living solo in young adulthood or in later life. Mid-life has received surprising little scholarly attention, despite the fact that living arrangements in mid-life are changing rapidly, and that household composition and socio-economic circumstances in the period immediately prior to retirement are strongly associated with living arrangements and associated sources of support in later life. This paper therefore aims to fill this gap. We begin with a review of previous research on living alone and present a conceptual framework of the pathways into living alone in mid-life. Data from the United Kingdom Household Longitudinal Survey (UKHLS) are used to analyse the partnership and parenthood histories and socio-economic characteristics of those currently living alone in mid-life. The findings indicate that the dissolution of a marriage with children is the dominant pathway into mid-life solo-living, but that there is also a substantial group of never partnered men living alone. These never partnered men are split between those with low and high socio-economic status. Distinguishing between different groups of individuals living alone in mid-life is important for policy as these groups of men and women will have different social and financial resources as they enter later life. Mid-life men living alone who have not had children, have no educational qualifications, are not economically active and who live in rented housing are likely to be most at risk of needing a social and economic 'safety net' in old age.

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## 1. Introduction

One of the most salient changes in family life across the industrialised world since the Second World War has been the steady rise in one-person households (Fokkema &

Liefbroer, 2008; Goldscheider & Waite, 1993; Hall, Ogden, & Hill, 1997; Jamieson, Wasoff, & Simpson, 2009; Prioux, 2002; Wall, 1989). Living alone in Europe is particularly common among women in late-middle and old age following the death of a spouse (Prioux, 2002; Wall, 1989). However, previous studies have found that more men than women live on their own in early and middle adult life (Prioux, 2002; Wall, 1989). For instance, in Northern and Western Europe in 2008, at ages 30–49 around one fifth of men were living alone compared to one tenth of women, whereas at ages 50–69 slightly more

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women than men were living alone (Iacovou & Skew, 2011). Since the 1980s, there has been a rise in living alone across Europe in the young and middle age groups, especially among middle-aged men (Demey, Berrington, Evandrou, & Falkingham, 2011; Fokkema & Liefbroer, 2008; Prioux, 2002). At the same time, the proportion of women living alone in later life has decreased as a result of improvements in male life expectancy (Macunovich, Easterlin, Schaeffer, & Crimmins, 1995; Prioux, 2002; Tomassini, Glaser, Douglas, Broese van Groenou, & Grundy, 2004). As a consequence, while in the past a considerably larger number of women than men lived alone, men have closed the gap in recent years (Prioux, 2002).

The rise in living alone in mid-life over time in part reflects recent changes in demographic behaviours and in the pathways into solo-living. Demographic changes commonly associated with the so-called Second Demographic Transition (Lesthaeghe, 1995) – such as the delay of family formation, the decrease in marriage rates and the diffusion of cohabitation, rising divorce rates and the rising incidence of childlessness – have led to a diversification of life course trajectories over time, with more people living without a partner or co-resident children. The magnitude of this shift is further underlined by the size of the cohorts currently in mid-life in Britain, reflecting those men and women born during the baby-booms of the late 1940s and early 1960s. In 1985 there were 20 million persons aged 35–64 in the United Kingdom; this rose by nearly a quarter to 24.7 million in 2010 (Office for National Statistics, 2011). The familial and economic resources of these mid-life men and women will be important determinants of future later life outcomes, such as living arrangements and care needs (Gaymu et al., 2006; Martikainen, Nihtilä, & Moustgaard, 2008; Mutchler & Burr, 1991; Pendry, Barrett, & Victor, 1999; Tohme, Yount, Yassine, Shideed, & Sibai, 2011). It remains the case that the majority of social care in later life is provided by co-residential spouses or children (Pickard, Wittenberg, Comas-Herrera, King, & Malley, 2007). Marital disruption has been shown to result in an increased loss of support (Glaser, Tomassini, Racioppi, & Stuchbury, 2006) and receipt of formal social care services in later life have been shown to be disproportionately concentrated on those older people living alone (Evandrou & Falkingham, 2004). Thus understanding the demographic and socio-economic composition of the currently middle-aged population is therefore important in its own right and is also a key element for policy makers both for ensuring appropriate services for this age group today and in planning the future provision of elderly care and housing as these groups enter old age.

Despite the rise in the prevalence of solo-living in mid-life, there has been little scholarly attention regarding the different pathways into living alone in this phase of the life course, and how these are in turn related to gender and socio-economic status, or on the policy implications of such a trend with regard to social and economic outcomes later in life. Furthermore, previous studies have mainly focussed on the *legal* marital status of those living alone, which is increasingly recognised as being unsuitable for assessing current partnership status as well as partnership history given the increases in cohabitation and

re-partnering as well as Living-Apart-Together (LAT) (Haskey & Lewis, 2006). This study aims to fill these gaps by investigating the partnership and parenthood trajectories of men and women currently living alone in mid-life in the UK and how these trajectories differ by socio-economic status.

This study contributes to the literature on living alone in mid-life, adding value to previous research in a number of ways including: (i) by examining actual partnership status rather than legal marital status and taking cohabitation into account; (ii) by investigating the presence of non-residential children; (iii) by adopting a gender perspective and considering both men and women; and (iv) by stressing the policy implications of an increasingly heterogeneous population living alone in mid-life.

We address the following three sets of research questions:

1. What are the partnership and parenthood trajectories into living alone among those men and women currently in mid-life (aged 35–64)?
  - a. What proportion has never partnered, ever partnered and ever re-partnered?
  - b. What proportion has ever had children?
2. How do these vary across mid-life i.e. between individuals in early (35–44), mid (45–54) and late (55–64) mid-life?
3. How do the socio-economic characteristics of those living alone in mid-life compare with those living with a partner? And how do they vary according to the partnership trajectory into living alone?

To answer these research questions, we analyse data from a new, very large national survey carried out in the UK in 2009 and 2010 which provides retrospective information on partnership and parenthood trajectories with detailed current information about living arrangements, children living outside the household and socio-economic attributes. In Section 2 we define what we mean by mid-life before reviewing the previous literature on living alone. In Section 3 we discuss the different pathways into living alone in mid-life and their interplay with socio-economic status and gender. In Section 4, we describe the data sources, sample and measures whilst the main findings are presented in Section 5. In Section 6 we conclude by summarising the main findings, drawing out the policy implications of familial and economic resources in mid-life for support and care needs in later life, and discussing the limitations of the study and opportunities for further research.

## 2. Previous research on living alone in mid-life

Mid-life or middle age is a phase in the life course which in the literature has commonly been situated between the end of the childbearing years and the onset of old age. Mid-life has been associated with several life course events, transitions and social roles particularly within family, employment and occupational trajectories, such as the growing up of children, the empty-nest period, or women's

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