

“Kinlessness,” Social Connectedness, and Subjective Well-Being in Europe

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Abstract

Objectives: This study examines the association between family structure and subjective well-being by focusing on the moderating effects of social connectedness across genders and country contexts. We compare the well-being of older adults across 4 family types: those with both a partner and children, those with a partner but not children, those with children but no partner, and those without a partner and children (“kinless”).

Methods: We use data from 6 waves of the European Social Survey (2012–2024) and estimate ordered logistic regression models of happiness and life satisfaction among middle-aged and older Europeans aged 50–104 (62,687 men and 73,323 women). We include interactions in the analysis to test whether social connectedness mitigates the well-being differences between kinless adults and partnered parents.

Results: The results show that middle-aged and older adults, especially men, without a partner exhibit lower levels of happiness and life satisfaction compared with their partnered counterparts, regardless of the absence of children. The subjective well-being gap between partnered and unpartnered men diminishes according to their level of social connectedness, a moderating effect primarily observed in Nordic and Western European countries.

Discussion: Contrary to the notion that “kinlessness” leads to aging alone, middle-aged and older men in less family-centered countries are able to alleviate the detrimental impact of partnerlessness on subjective well-being through increased social connectedness. In contrast, in countries where family ties are more emphasized, particularly in Eastern Europe, un-partnered adults face greater well-being challenges that are harder to offset with social connectedness.

Keywords: Childless, Family structure, Kinless, Social networks, Unpartnered

In contemporary European societies, demographic shifts, such as decreasing marriage and fertility rates, have led to profound transformations in family structures. An increasing proportion of middle-aged and older adults now has—and will have in the future—few or no family members (Brown et al., 2022; Plick et al., 2021). These demographic trends, primarily affecting the availability of “nuclear” family ties (i.e., partners and children), can pose unique challenges related to well-being and the availability of informal care in later life. Thus, a growing body of research has explored the spread of “kinlessness,” mostly defined as having neither a partner nor children, and its effects on later-life well-being (e.g., Verdery et al., 2019). Studies consistently show that kinless adults have worse physical and mental health, as well as a higher probability of living in retirement homes and reporting unmet needs compared with partnered older people and parents (Arpino et al., 2022; Grundy et al., 2019; Margolis & Verdery, 2017; Margolis et al., 2022; Patterson & Margolis, 2023; Zhou et al., 2019).

Nonetheless, kinless adults are not necessarily aging alone, nor are they devoid of sources of support and fulfillment (Carr, 2019). Middle-aged and older adults who lack close

family ties may achieve a sense of social connectedness—i.e., having meaningful social relationships and active participation in social activities (Cornwell & Waite, 2009)—by relying more strongly on alternative relationships, such as friendships, extended family members and other people in their networks, that may be good substitutes in terms of support and companionship (Cantor, 1979; Kalmijn, 2024). Studies, for instance, show that kinless individuals tend to have more friends in their networks and are more likely to communicate with them daily compared with their counterparts with close family (Mair, 2019; Margolis et al., 2022). These meaningful relationships and engagement in social activities are, in turn, associated with better mental health and subjective well-being (Djundeva et al., 2019; Schwartz & Litwin, 2019).

This study extends the existing research on kinlessness by moving beyond *average differences* between kinless adults and their counterparts with close family in their *levels* of well-being and social connectedness. Apart from any difference in the level of their social connectedness (Margolis et al., 2022), kinless adults may value their social activities and connections outside the family more, compared with their counterparts who have partners and children. Thus, we argue that social

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connectedness may be *more strongly linked* to subjective well-being for kinless older adults than for those with close family, potentially mitigating the well-being differences by family structure types. These effects are plausibly gendered, as women may be less affected by the absence of close family ties and tend to vary depending on whether the country context is less or more family-centered (Mair, 2013, 2019). Drawing on European Social Survey data from 35 European countries, we assess the previously unexplored moderating effects of social connectedness on the associations between kinlessness and subjective well-being across genders and country contexts.

Background and Hypotheses

Partnerlessness, Childlessness, and Kinlessness

“Kinlessness” entails the combination of childlessness and living without a partner. The latter may be expected to independently shape older people’s well-being. A secure relationship with a partner can provide a stable foundation for personal growth and a protective support system during times of need (Berkman et al., 2000). Partners typically have shared lifestyles and experiences, live in close proximity, and have long-term internalized commitment towards each other, and the task-specificity model posits that these characteristics make the partner dyad highly suitable for mutual exchanges of various types of support (Litwak, 1985). Accordingly, empirical work has shown that having a partner is a key source of practical and emotional support, fostering later-life well-being, particularly for men, who often rely more on a partner for social interactions and support (e.g., Grundy et al., 2019; Koropecjy-Cox, 2002; Lakomý, 2024). Hence, we hypothesize that older people who do not live with a partner have poorer subjective well-being than their counterparts living with a partner, regardless of the presence of children (*Partnerlessness hypothesis*), whereby we expect this effect to be more pronounced in men than in women (*Gendered partnerlessness hypothesis*).

Next to partners, adult children are the most important providers of support in later life (Wolff & Kasper, 2006). Adult children often maintain a life-long commitment to their parents and share overlapping lived experiences and lifestyle preferences (Antonucci et al., 2014). These factors make them viable sources of social integration, stress buffering, and various forms of support, such as emotional support or temporary care during illness (Berkman et al., 2000). Although childlessness is often perceived as a greater source of vulnerability for women due to societal expectations surrounding motherhood and family roles, some studies suggest it has a more pronounced impact on men’s life satisfaction (Dykstra & Wagner, 2007; Tolkamp & Pollmann-Schult, 2024) and loneliness (Penning et al., 2024; Zhang & Hayward, 2001)—the latter known as a precursor to declines in subjective well-being (VanderWeele et al., 2012). This has been tentatively attributed to men’s greater reliance on close family for social support (cf. Penning et al., 2024). Thus, we hypothesize that childless middle-aged and older people have poorer subjective well-being than their counterparts with children, regardless of their partnership status (*Childlessness hypothesis*). Again, we expect this association to be particularly strong for men (*Gendered childlessness hypothesis*).

Detrimental implications of partnerlessness and of childlessness for well-being may amplify each other. Adult children may be a particularly important source of support for older

adults who cannot turn to a partner (Cantor, 1979; Litwak, 1985). Recently, scholars have argued that the rapidly growing group of older adults who are not just living without a partner, but also without children, is at risk of becoming so-called “elder orphans,” that is, older individuals who live alone and have an inadequate support system (Carney et al., 2016; Carr & Utz, 2020). Consistent with this reasoning, previous research has shown that childless older adults report lower life satisfaction (Van der Pers et al., 2015) and higher loneliness (Penning et al., 2024) compared with parents, particularly when they live without a partner. Moreover, kinless older adults have been found to experience poorer mental health compared with those with partners or nearby children (Patterson & Margolis, 2023), with the negative impact of kinlessness being stronger for men than for women (Margolis et al., 2022). This leads us to hypothesize that lacking both a partner and children is associated with the lowest level of subjective well-being compared with other family structure types (*Kinlessness hypothesis*), and that the well-being differences by family structure are most pronounced for men (*Gendered kinlessness hypothesis*).

Social Connectedness

Social connectedness can be defined as the extent to which one has meaningful social relationships and actively participates in social activities (Cornwell & Waite, 2009). Prior empirical work has focused on different aspects of social connectedness, with studies highlighting positive associations between the number of social relationships in one’s network (Wang, 2016), the frequency of face-to-face interactions with others (MacDonald et al., 2021) and participation in social activities (Huxhold et al., 2014) with older adults’ well-being.

The strength of the links between social connectedness and well-being may be contingent on older adults’ family structure. In line with both the hierarchical-compensatory model (Cantor, 1979) and the task-specificity model (Litwak, 1985), qualitative research suggests that socializing with non-family and maintaining relationships with friends are particularly important for older persons lacking close kin (Shahrak et al., 2023). Building on the premise that “unpartnered older adults may use social connectedness to confer the benefits that partnered people get from their partners” (pp. 353–354), Ermer and Proulx (2019) found that the positive association between social network size and well-being—including happiness—was particularly large for unpartnered older adults. Similar moderating effects may be expected for childless and kinless adults, as a recent study of older individuals in Singapore revealed that only childless individuals with few social connections and limited community engagement reported lower levels of happiness and life satisfaction compared with their counterparts with children (Teerawichitchainan et al., 2024). Hence, we hypothesize that the negative association between kinlessness and subjective well-being weakens with increasing levels of social connectedness (*Mitigation hypothesis*). Given that we expect the associations between kinlessness and subjective well-being to be most pronounced in men, we also expect that the potential for social connectedness to mitigate these associations is, in absolute terms, larger for men than for women (*Gendered mitigation hypothesis*).

Country Differences

The extent to which greater social connectedness can alleviate the detrimental well-being effects of kinlessness may

depend on the country context. Family orientations differ notably across European countries. Drawing on European Values Study data, van Vlimmeren et al. (2017) identified four country clusters with distinct family cultures: (a) Nordic, (b) Western, (c) Eastern, and (d) Southern European countries (cf. Tosi & Grundy, 2018). In the Eastern-European and Southern-European clusters, views about marriage and filial obligations tend to be more traditional than in the Western-European and, particularly, the Nordic clusters (cf. Daatland et al., 2011). In strongly family-oriented societies, where traditional family norms prevail, kinlessness may be more likely to violate social norms about parenthood, thereby posing greater challenges to subjective well-being (Huijts et al., 2013; Verbakel, 2012). In such countries, close family ties are relatively often supportive, rather than autonomous (Dykstra & Fokkema, 2012), presumably making the lack of close family ties more difficult to alleviate by relying on alternative sources of fulfillment and connectedness (Mair, 2013). We hypothesize that the negative associations between kinlessness and subjective well-being are less strongly mitigated by social connectedness in Eastern- and Southern than in Western-European and Nordic countries (*Country differences hypothesis*).

Method

Data and Sample

Our empirical analysis draws on pooled cross-sectional data for 35 European countries from rounds 6 (2012/2013), 7 (2014/2015), 8 (2016/2017), 9 (2018/2019), 10 (2020/2022), and 11 (2023/2024) of the European Social Survey (ESS). We select rounds six onwards because variables regarding social connectedness are not fully comparable in earlier rounds. Data were collected using face-to-face interviews, with the exception of round 10, which took place during coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), where nine countries (Austria, Cyprus, Germany, Spain, Israel, Latvia, Poland, Serbia, and Sweden) switched to an online and paper-and-pencil self-completion approach. Post-stratification design weights are provided to use multiple waves including round 10 (see Analytical Strategy). The overall sample is representative of residential populations aged 15+ in each country living in private households, regardless of nationality and citizenship or language. Approximately 50,000 individuals answered the survey in each round.

Our sample is restricted to adults aged 50–104 living in 35 European countries ($n = 68,534$ men and 80,864 women). We 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 or independent variables (4,138 men, 6.2%, and 5,538 women, 7.0%). The final sample includes 62,687 men and 73,323 women.

Measures

Our dependent variables are happiness and life satisfaction, 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). These indicators are crucial dimensions of quality of life and validated measures of subjective well-being, with life satisfaction capturing cognitive evaluations of one’s self and life and

happiness reflecting the emotional component of subjective well-being (Diener et al., 2018).

Our central independent variable 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) kinless, that is, having no partner and no children. 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 household grid information at the time of the interview and retrospective information on whether respondents ever had a child living in the household. Thus, we consider both biological and stepchildren but not children who never lived with the parent (respondent) at home, such as those raised in institutes, foster families, or by other family members.

Our social connectedness measure 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?” (from 1 “none” to 7 “ten people or more”), “how often do you meet socially with friends, relatives or work colleagues?” (from 1 “never” to 7 “daily”), “Compared with other people of your age, how often would you say you take part in social activities?” (from 1 “Much less than most” to 5 “Much more than most”). These indicators have been used earlier to measure individual engagement in social networks as part of the broader concept of social capital (Halman & Luijkx, 2006; Portela et al., 2013). We analyze these three items by using a polychoric correlation matrix and applying factor analysis to create a unique measure of social connectedness. The standardized scale, ranging from -2.1 to 2.1, has a good internal consistency (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.73$).

Control variables included in the analysis are: age (mean = 64 for women and 63 for men; range: 50–104), country dummies, employment status (working or not working), household income quintiles (calculated on the overall sample), migration background, attendance at religious rituals (never, occasionally, and every week), and having chronic 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 (native), those born abroad (1st generation), and those born in the country of the interview whose parents were born abroad (2nd generation). We create four country groups, distinguishing between Eastern-European (Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Hungary, Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Poland, Russia, Ukraine, North Macedonia, Slovenia, Serbia, Croatia, Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro), Southern-European (Italy, Greece, Portugal, Cyprus, and Spain) Nordic- (Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden), and Western-European (Austria, Belgium, Germany, France, Ireland, Netherlands, Switzerland, United Kingdom) countries.

Analytical Strategy

After reporting summary statistics of the sample (Table 1), we show results of multivariate analyses following three steps. First, the *partnerlessness*, *childlessness*, and *kinlessness*

hypotheses are tested by estimating ordered logistic regression models on happiness and life satisfaction (Table 2). These models assume that a latent cardinal measure is mapped into the observed ordinal scales, that is, happiness and life satisfaction. Therefore, we obtain one estimate for each variable on the overall scale, under the assumption of proportional odds. Given that we expect gender differences in the magnitude of the effects of family structure types—that is, the *gendered partnerlessness, childlessness, and kinlessness hypotheses*—we perform both separate analyses for men and women, and models including interactions between family structure and gender.

Second, interactions between family structure types and social connectedness are added to the model to test the *mitigation hypothesis*. We calculate the average marginal effects (AMEs) of having no partners with and without children versus having both partners and children on the probability of reporting a well-being score of 8+. We choose this threshold as a medium-high score of subjective well-being, covering approximately half of the total population aged 50+. The probability of having a well-being score of 8+ is calculated as the arithmetic sum of the probabilities of reporting a score equal to 10, 9, and 8. We present separate AMEs for men and women (Figures 1 and 2) and formally test the *gendered mitigation hypothesis* by using three-way interactions.

Third, we analyze whether social connectedness mitigates the well-being effects of the lack of partners and children to a

different extent in more family-centered (Eastern and Southern European countries) and less family-centered (Nordic and Western European countries) countries (*country differences hypothesis*). We present separate models for men and women in each country group (Table 3). All analyses are weighted using the post-stratified design weights which correct for differential selection probabilities within each country, for non-response, for non-coverage, and for sampling error related to gender, age, education, and geographical region (Kaminska, 2023). Full estimates and models including interactions for social connectedness, gender, and country differences are reported in [Supplementary Material](#).

Results

Descriptive Results

Table 1 presents summary statistics for the sample by family structure types. Among middle-aged and older men, 70% have both partners and children, 7.8% have partners but not children, 11.9% have children but no partner, and 6.3% are kinless. Due to higher longevity, the proportion of women with no partner is higher, with 27.7% of them having children but no partner and 5.8% being kinless. Kinless men are, on average, younger (61.5 vs 63.1 years old), less educated (37.8% vs 27.8% with lower than secondary education), and poorer (34.9% vs 8.8% in the lowest income quintile) than those with

Table 1. Summary Statistics According to Family Structure Types

Variables	Partner and child(ren)		Partner, no child(ren)		Child(ren), no partner		No partner, no children	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Happiness, mean	7.4	7.4	7.4	7.5	6.5	6.7	6.4	6.8
Life satisfaction, mean	7.1	7.1	7.3	7.3	6.4	6.4	6.4	6.7
Social connectedness, mean	0.04	0.03	0.01	0.01	-0.02	-0.06	-0.06	-0.03
Age in years, mean	63.1	62.1	64.7	63.2	66.4	68.9	61.5	66.1
Education, %								
Lower than secondary	27.8	32.9	30.4	31.9	33.9	43.1	37.8	34.8
Secondary	52.1	49.3	50.5	47.2	51.3	42.7	47.2	43.2
Tertiary	20.0	17.8	19.1	20.9	14.8	14.2	15.1	22.0
Migration background, %								
Native	86.2	86.1	86.0	86.1	84.2	85.0	88.3	87.5
1st generation	8.1	8.3	8.9	8.7	8.9	9.0	5.5	7.2
2nd generation	5.7	5.6	5.1	5.3	6.9	6.0	6.1	5.4
Health limitation(s), %	32.1	33.7	32.7	32.9	43.3	47.8	38.9	40.2
Working, %	16.2	15.3	19.3	16.6	16.6	15.4	16.7	16.3
Income quintiles, %								
1st (lowest)	8.8	9.8	9.9	10.8	31.2	37.8	34.9	34.3
2nd	18.0	18.7	19.4	19.2	23.8	22.2	22.2	25.5
3rd	20.8	20.3	21.1	20.3	15.0	11.6	13.1	13.4
4th	19.3	18.2	17.6	17.0	8.8	6.8	7.4	6.9
5th (highest)	33.1	33.0	32.0	32.7	21.1	21.5	22.3	19.9
Religious attendance, %								
At least once a week	13.9	19.0	13.4	16.9	11.0	20.2	13.2	23.6
Occasionally	53.3	54.3	47.7	50.0	46.4	52.6	46.3	47.1
Never	32.8	26.6	38.9	33.0	42.6	27.2	40.5	29.3
Total, %	74.0	60.4	7.8	6.1	11.9	27.7	6.3	5.8

Note: Results weighted for the post-stratified design weights.

both a partner and children. Kinless women tend to be older (66.1 vs 62.1 years old), less educated (34.8% vs 32.9% with lower than secondary education) and poorer (34.3% vs 9.8% in the lowest income quintile) than partnered mothers. Both men and women without a partner and children, on average, have lower levels of happiness and life satisfaction, compared with their partnered counterparts with children.

Family Structure and Subjective Well-Being

Table 2 presents results from ordered logistic regression models of happiness and life satisfaction, with social connectedness excluded (Panel A) and included (Panel B) in the analysis. Among both men and women (Panel A), there are no significant differences between those with partners but not children and those who have both. Conversely, lacking a partner is associated with significantly lower subjective well-being. The odds of reporting high scores of happiness and life satisfaction are lower by a factor 0.49 and 0.64, respectively, for middle-aged and older men with children but no partner, compared with those with both partner and children. Similarly, women with children but no partner have 0.57 and 0.67 times lower odds of reporting high scores of happiness and life satisfaction, respectively, compared with partnered mothers. The happiness and life satisfaction scores associated

with kinless men and women are comparable to those of unpartnered individuals with children. Specifically, the odds ratios are 0.45 (happiness) and 0.62 (life satisfaction) for men and 0.53 (happiness) and 0.68 (life satisfaction) for women. These results indicate that the lack of a partner is the main

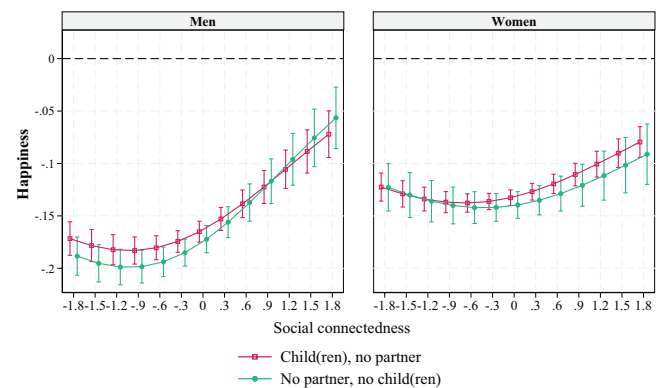


Figure 1. Average marginal effects of having children but not partners and of having no partner and no children compared with having both partners and children on the probability of reporting a happiness score above 7, according to social connectedness.

Table 2. Ordered Logistic Regression Models on Happiness and Life Satisfaction

Variable	Happiness		Life satisfaction	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
	OR	OR	OR	OR
<i>Panel A</i>				
Family structure (Ref. partner and children)				
Partner, no children	0.95	0.94	0.99	0.97
Children, no partner	0.49**	0.57**	0.64**	0.67**
No partner, no children	0.45**	0.53**	0.62**	0.68**
Observations	62,687	73,323	62,687	73,323
<i>Test on gender differences</i>				
Family structure (Ref. Partner and children)				
Partner, no children * women	0.98		1.01	
Children, no partner * women	1.15**		1.11**	
No partner, no children * women	1.16**		1.13*	
Observations	136,010		136,010	
<i>Panel B</i>				
Family structure (Ref. partner and children)				
Partner, no children	0.98	0.96	1.02	1.00
Children, no partner	0.48**	0.56**	0.63**	0.66**
No partner, no children	0.46**	0.54**	0.64**	0.69**
Social connectedness	1.91**	1.95**	1.72**	1.78**
Observations	62,687	73,323	62,687	73,323
<i>Test on gender differences</i>				
Family structure (Ref. partner and children)				
Partner, no children * women	0.98		1.00	
Children, no partner * women	1.13**		1.10**	
No partner, no children * women	1.14*		1.11*	
Observations	136,010		136,010	

Notes: Control variables include: age, age squared, education, migration background, health limitation(s), working, income quintiles, religious attendance, 35 country dummies, 6 dummies for survey round (from 6 to 11), and 10 intercepts for each cut point in happiness and life satisfaction scales. Results weighted for the post-stratified design weights. OR = xxx; Ref. = xxx. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$.

driver of subjective well-being differences across family types, which is consistent with the *partnerlessness hypothesis* but contrasts with our *childlessness* and *kinlessness hypotheses*. We formally test gender differences by including interactions between gender and family structure types in the models, listed at the bottom of Panel A. The gap in happiness and life satisfaction between partnered and unpartnered adults—including both kinless adults and those having children but no partner—is significantly smaller for women than for men, which provides support to the *gendered partnerlessness hypothesis*. Notably, the estimates change only slightly after controlling for the index of social connectedness (Panel B of Table 2), which is positively associated with higher happiness and life satisfaction scores. The odds associated with kinlessness are similar to those of unpartnered parents and lower than those of partnered adults, either with or without children. Gender differences remain significant, with unpartnered men reporting lower levels of happiness and life satisfaction than unpartnered women.

Mitigation Hypothesis

Interactions between family structure and social connectedness are added in ordered logistic models to test the hypothesis that social connectedness alleviates the subjective well-being gap between partnered parents and those having neither a partner nor a child (*mitigation hypothesis*). Figures 1 and 2 present the average marginal effects (AME) of having children but no partner and of being kinless compared with having both a partner

and children on the probability of reporting high levels (8+) of happiness and life satisfaction, by their level of social connectedness. We do not report estimates for childless individuals with partners, as they show no significant differences compared with 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 with having both) reduce from -17 percentage points (95% CI: -19 to -16) to -7 percentage

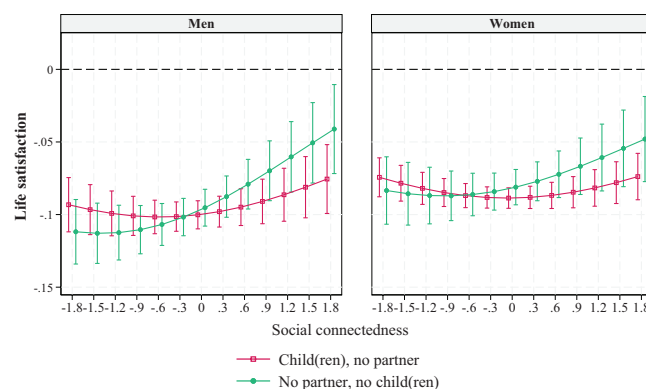


Figure 2. Average marginal effects of having children but not partners and of having no partner and no children compared with having both partners and children on the probability of reporting a life satisfaction score above 7, according to social connectedness.

Table 3. Ordered Logistic Regression Models on Happiness and Life Satisfaction by Country Cluster

Variable	Western		Eastern		Nordic		Southern	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
	OR	OR	OR	OR	OR	OR	OR	OR
<i>Happiness</i>								
Family structure (Ref. Partner and children)								
Partner, no children	0.99	1.03	0.82*	0.97	0.90	0.88	0.99	0.79*
Children, no partner	0.44**	0.47**	0.55**	0.68**	0.40**	0.41**	0.41**	0.51**
No partner, no children	0.50**	0.52**	0.41**	0.66**	0.35**	0.30**	0.40**	0.51**
Social connectedness	1.67**	1.84**	1.90**	1.84**	1.73**	1.76**	1.90**	2.09**
Family * connectedness								
Partner, no children * Social connectedness	1.09	1.00	0.76	0.11	1.17	0.90	1.36*	1.09
Children, no partner * Social connectedness	1.37**	1.16**	1.11	1.03	1.42**	1.39**	1.16	1.13
No partner, no children * Social connectedness	1.59**	1.06	0.92	1.10	1.48**	1.52**	1.43**	1.06
<i>Life satisfaction</i>								
Family structure (Ref. partner and children)								
Partner, no children	1.06	1.08	1.01	0.90	0.90	1.02	0.93	0.84*
Children, no partner	0.58**	0.57**	0.71**	0.77**	0.59**	0.57**	0.54**	0.61**
No partner, no children	0.65**	0.66**	0.60**	0.84*	0.55**	0.50**	0.61**	0.66**
Social connectedness	1.64**	1.75**	1.71**	1.65**	1.62**	1.80**	1.75**	1.94**
Family * connectedness								
Partner, no children * Social connectedness	1.01	1.12	0.92	1.08	0.96	0.83	1.29*	0.97
Children, no partner * Social connectedness	1.10	1.16**	1.03	0.97	1.27*	1.23*	0.94	1.00
No partner, no children * Social connectedness	1.37**	0.99	0.86	1.11	1.33*	1.27*	1.16	1.15
Observations	24,367	25,848	19,334	26,755	9,932	9,755	9,054	10,965

Notes: Control variables include those presented in Table 2, country dummies, 6 dummies for survey round (from 6 to 11), and 10 intercepts for each cut point in happiness and life satisfaction scales. Nordic countries are: Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Sweden. Western countries are: Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany, France, Ireland, and United Kingdom. Eastern countries are: Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Hungary, Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Poland, Russia, Ukraine, North Macedonia, Slovenia, Serbia, Croatia, Kosovo, Albania, Montenegro. Southern countries are: Italy, Greece, Portugal, Cyprus, and Spain. Results weighted for the post-stratified design weights. OR = odds ratio; Ref. = Partner and children. ** $p < .01$. * $p < .05$.

points (95% CI: -9 to -5) according to their level of social connectedness. The estimated AMEs are similar for men without both partners and children, varying from -19 percentage points (95% CI: -20 to -17) to -6 percentage points (95% CI: -9 to -3). In contrast, among middle-aged women, the AMEs of being kinless, as opposed to having both partners and children, do not vary significantly according to their level of social connectedness. In addition, the happiness gap between partnered women and un-partnered mothers changes only slightly according to social connectedness, with an AME of -12 percentage points (95% CI: -14 to -11) for those with a low level of social connectedness and an AME of -8 percentage points (95% CI: -9 to -6) for those with a high level of social connectedness.

Figure 2 presents the AMEs of two family structure types (having children but not partners and kinlessness) compared with those with both partners and children on the probability of reporting a high life satisfaction score (above 7). Among both men and women, there are no significant interactions with regard to those having children but not partners. Conversely, kinless men with lower social connectedness are 11 percentage points (95% CI: -13 to -9) less likely than partnered fathers to report a happiness score of 8+. This gap reduces slightly (AME = -9 percentage points, 95% CI: -11 to -8) for those with an average score of social connectedness and becomes closer to zero (AME = -4 percentage points, 95% CI: -7 to 1) for those with high levels of social connectedness. The moderating effect of social connectedness is found among kinless men but not women. In fact, the AMEs of having no partners and no children compared with having both changes only slightly for women, from -8 percentage points (95% CI: -10 to -6) to -5 percentage points (95% CI: -8 to -2) with overlapping confidence intervals. Models with three-way interactions (Supplementary Table 6) confirm that the moderating effects of social connectedness are significantly smaller for women than for men. Therefore, the findings support the *gendered mitigation hypothesis*.

European Contexts

Table 3 presents separate analyses for our four country clusters. With the exception of women living in Southern Europe, middle-aged and older adults with partners report similar levels of happiness and life satisfaction, irrespective of whether they have children. In contrast, older adults without partners (regardless of whether they have children) exhibit lower levels of happiness and life satisfaction compared with their partnered counterparts. Higher levels of social connectedness are associated with higher scores in happiness and life satisfaction. The moderating effect of social connectedness differs notably between the country clusters, however. Interactions between family structure and social connectedness are significant for both men and women in Nordic countries, supporting the *mitigating hypothesis*. Similarly, in Western European countries, higher levels of social connectedness reduce subjective well-being differences associated with family structure, particularly for kinless men and women without partners but with children. This mitigating effect is, however, not observed in Eastern Europe, where the odds ratios for the interactions are non-significant and close to one. In Southern Europe, these interactions remain non-significant as well, with the exception of partnered men without children and the case of happiness among kinless men. Overall, middle-aged and older adults living in Nordic / Western European countries appear to be better able to mitigate the absence of a partner

with other social relationships and activities, compared with those living in Southern / Eastern European countries. We further test country differences with three-way interactions between family structure, social connectedness and country cluster (Supplementary Table 11). The results confirm that the moderating effect of social connectedness is smaller in the Eastern country cluster than in the Nordic and Western clusters, whereas in the Southern cluster, it is weaker than in the Nordic cluster only for individuals without a partner but with children. This provides partial support to the *country differences hypothesis*.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined the association between family structure and subjective well-being in midlife and old age, by focusing on the moderating effects of social connectedness in 35 European countries. Consistent with previous research findings on kinless older adults (e.g., Margolis et al., 2022), we showed that middle-aged and older people without a partner and children have lower levels of subjective well-being compared with those who have both. These differences in subjective well-being are mainly driven by lacking partners, whereas we found no evidence that the absence of children is associated with poor subjective well-being. Our findings also show that the gap between the subjective well-being of partnered and unpartnered adults is larger for men than for women, which is consistent with the *gendered partnerlessness hypothesis* suggesting that men rely more on their partners for support (Grundy et al., 2019; Lakomý, 2024; Penning et al., 2024). We found no support for our *kinlessness hypothesis*, which posits that kinless adults exhibit the lowest levels of subjective well-being compared with those with a partner, children, or both. Prior work also showed that childlessness was not necessarily linked to lower levels of well-being; rather, its impact varies according to work-family lifecourses, parent-child relationship quality, and the outcome of interest (Albertini & Arpino, 2018; Patterson & Margolis, 2023; Quashie et al., 2021; Tosi & Grundy, 2021; Van den Broek et al., 2019).

In line with our *gendered mitigation hypothesis*, the subjective well-being gap between kinless men and those with both partners and children appears to narrow, though not fully close, with increasing levels of social connectedness. Plausibly, kinless men place greater value on activities and relationships outside the nuclear family, and these alternative sources of support and companionship can mitigate their gap in subjective well-being compared with parented fathers. This is consistent with other studies suggesting that when partners and children are absent, friends, neighbors, and extended kin serve as support sources, promoting feelings of belonging and self-realization (Ermer & Proulx, 2019; Kalmijn, 2024). The moderating effect of social connectedness matters more for men than for women, despite women generally having larger social networks and support systems in later life. This may reflect that widowhood, which is more common among women, is particularly hard to compensate for. However, our additional analyses distinguishing between widowed, separated and never married women indicate no marked differences between these groups in their levels of subjective well-being and the moderating effects of social connectedness. Plausibly, the different results for men and women reported here reflect men's greater reliance on partners for social support (cf. Penning et al., 2024). The absence of a partner may be

a greater loss for men, potentially compelling them to assign more meaning to active engagement in community activities or close friendships, helping to mitigate their well-being gap compared with those with both a partner and children.

This study showed that, in Nordic and Western European countries, kinless men are better able to alleviate their gap in subjective well-being relative to partnered fathers by relying on alternative sources of fulfilment and connectedness. Conversely, those living in family-oriented countries, particularly in Eastern Europe, place greater value on close family ties (Dykstra & Fokkema, 2012; Mair, 2013), which plausibly makes the negative well-being impact of kinlessness more difficult to mitigate through social connectedness. These countries' typically lower economic development and weaker public welfare systems may further exacerbate the well-being challenges of older adults without close family ties.

When interpreting these results at least five limitations should be acknowledged. First, we do not distinguish between voluntary and involuntary childlessness, which could be an important distinction when estimating the association between family structure and subjective well-being. Second, we use an overall measure of social connectedness without distinguishing between different types of relationships that older adults may have with extended kin, friends, and neighbors. Consequently, we are unable to pinpoint the specific roles of kin or non-kin relationships in contributing to subjective well-being. Third, the group of older adults with partners and children is heterogeneous, including individuals who may be disconnected from their close kin and are likely to have lower levels of mental health (Patterson & Margolis, 2023), which could further impact our results. Fourth, like previous studies on kinlessness (Margolis et al., 2022), we acknowledge concerns regarding endogeneity. Early life circumstances, such as poor health and well-being, may influence both older adults' family structures and well-being outcomes. Although our control variables, including household income and chronic health limitations, attempt to account for this, they only partially address endogeneity issues, making our findings primarily associational. Fifth, although we adjust our models for age and wave of data collection, analyses of repeated cross-sectional data, such as those performed here, do not allow one to isolate cohort, age, and period effects. This calls for caution when interpreting our results. Cohort differences stemming from generational shifts in societal norms or economic conditions may, for instance, make it difficult to fully untangle the independent effect of partnerlessness or childlessness from broader cohort-specific influences on well-being.

Despite these limitations, this study offers key insights into the well-being of middle-aged and older adults without partners and children. For men in Nordic and Western European countries, greater social connectedness can alleviate the detrimental impact of partnerlessness on subjective well-being. Contrary to the notion that later-life kinlessness leads to social isolation and poor well-being, many older Europeans are able to build networks beyond the nuclear family, alleviating their well-being when lacking a partner. Hence, kinless adults are not necessarily "aging alone" or becoming "elder orphans" (Carney et al., 2016) when other social activities and relationships are meaningful and supportive. However, in countries where family ties are more emphasized, particularly in Eastern Europe, older adults without partners or children are less or no able to rely on other forms of connectedness for their well-being. Our study highlights the importance of

considering the country context and the interplay between close family ties and older adults' broader network of connections.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary data are available at *The Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences* online.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

Data Availability

The study was not preregistered. This study uses European Social Survey Data publicly available at <https://ess.sikt.no/en/?tab=overview>

Author Contributions

M. T.: Conceptualization, first drafting, editing and writing, data analysis, interpretation. T. V. d. B.: Conceptualization, editing and writing, interpretation.

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