Lone parenthood across the life course in Europe

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Background
This project will investigate the emergence, drivers, and consequences of lone parenthood across individual life courses in Europe. Unprecedented changes in family behaviours, such as the dramatic increase in non-marital cohabitation, non-marital childbearing, and union dissolution have meant that lone parenthood (i.e., one parent and at least one child living in the same household) has become a common life stage for an increasing number of individuals. Whereas in the past widowhood was the main reason for becoming a lone parent, contemporary lone parenthood is largely the result of divorce and separation. Thus, lone parenthood is a new social risk to which an increasing proportion of individuals are exposed. This is a major issue because lone parent families are amongst the most vulnerable groups; they can face higher risks of poverty and social disadvantage, and tend to have poorer health than two-parent families.

Although many studies have focused on the outcomes of lone parents, existing studies tend to examine lone parents at one point in time or study change over time but not following the same individuals. Additionally, most studies focus on a single national context even though the drivers and implications of lone parenthood are likely to differ across European countries with different combinations of social, cultural, and institutional settings.

The proposed research fills these gaps by following individuals across their life course in Europe. We investigate the following questions: What are the main trends in lone parenthood when we follow the same individuals over time? Can we identify a typology of lone parents based on their partnership experiences? Is this typology common among all socio-economic groups and across countries? Which individual demographic and socioeconomic characteristics are associated with becoming a lone parent? How do these relationships vary across countries? How does becoming a lone parent influence individuals’ employment, health, and subsequent partnerships? How are lone parents’ family lives, employment, and health interrelated?

Objectives
The aim of the proposed project is to study the emergence, drivers, and consequences of lone parenthood across individuals’ life course in Europe. Specific objectives are to (1) describe trends in lone parenthood in Europe by exploring the proportion of lone parents at any given age, at what age individuals become lone parents, and how long they remain lone parents (2)
identify the demographic and socio-economic drivers of lone parenthood across Europe by studying partnership pathways leading to lone parenthood and individual characteristics associated with becoming a lone parent, and (3) investigate the consequences of lone parenthood on the employment, health, and subsequent partnerships of lone parents and to explore the interrelationships between these outcomes.

**Data and Methodology**

To achieve objectives (1) and (2) we will use data from two sets of comparable national surveys (Generations and Gender Programme and the Harmonized Histories) which are ideal to follow individuals across their life course in Europe. The data include information on the start and end date of up to nine partnerships and the date of childbirths. We will compare Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Lithuania, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the UK. To achieve objective (3), we will analyse a large household panel surveys from the UK (UK Household Longitudinal Study) which collects data on the same individuals’ partnerships, employment, and health each year. This part of the analysis focuses on the UK because the necessary data are not readily available for a European comparison.

We will use a range of cutting edge longitudinal methods which allow us to follow the same individuals over time. Sequence analysis will be used to describe trends in lone parenthood (objective 1) and will be combined with cluster analysis to identify a typology of lone parents based on their partnership experiences (objective 2). Then, we will use multinomial logistic regression to explore the association between socio-economic characteristics and belonging to different lone parenthood ‘types’. Additionally, to determine which individual characteristics are associated with becoming a lone parent, panel regression will be used on a dataset which pools information from all study countries. Cross-national differences will be studied using interaction terms between country and the drivers of lone parenthood. To study repartnering, and changes in employment and health status (objective 3), we will use event history techniques. Lone parents will be distinguished using the developed typology to understand whether the consequences of lone parenthood differ by previous partnership experiences. Finally, we will use multi-process event history models to study the interrelationships between lone parents’ employment, health, and repartnering.