

The Gendered Impact of Early Partnership Trajectories on Life Satisfaction among the Elderly: A Contribution to a Better Understanding of Social Inequality in an Ageing Population

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Abstract: Recent research results emphasize that women are less satisfied with their lives than men around the globe throughout their lives, but specifically at higher ages. Life course events furthermore more likely affect life satisfaction of women than men; with respect to partnership-related events, this however only applies when looking at recurrent events, highlighting the importance of analysing long-term effects in this area of research. Given the interrelation between events within life courses, it is crucial to take the context into account – a perspective which is missing in this area of research. Based on different strands of theory and considering prior evidence, we therefore analysed long-term effects of partnerships based on life course trajectories. We found that effects increase with age among women, while they decrease with age among men, suggesting that men can compensate for negative experiences from partnerships with resources from other spheres of life over time, while the dependency on secondary resources from earlier partnership experiences increases with age among women. We conclude that segregated gender roles create a high risk of low quality of life among subgroups of women at more advanced ages.

Keywords: Life satisfaction, partnership, gender roles, midlife, role conflicts, role enrichment

Geschlechtsspezifische Auswirkungen früher Partnerschaftsverläufe auf die Lebenszufriedenheit im Alter: Ein Beitrag zum besseren Verständnis sozialer Ungleichheit in einer alternden Gesellschaft

Zusammenfassung: Aktuelle Forschungsergebnisse betonen, dass Frauen weltweit weniger zufrieden mit ihrem Leben sind als Männer, insbesondere im höheren Alter. Die Lebenszufriedenheit von Frauen wird zudem generell stärker durch Lebensereignisse beeinflusst; bei partnerschaftsbezogenen Ereignissen trifft dies jedoch nur bei einer Betrachtung wiederholter Ereignisse zu, was die Bedeutung der Analyse langfristiger Effekte in diesem Forschungsbereich unterstreicht. Auf Basis verschiedener theoretischer Ansätze und unter Berücksichtigung bisheriger Erkenntnisse haben wir daher langfristige Auswirkungen von Partnerschaften auf Basis von Lebensverlaufsmustern analysiert. Unsere Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die Auswirkungen von Lebensverlaufsmustern auf die Lebenszufriedenheit mit zunehmendem Alter bei Frauen stärker werden, während sie bei Männern abnehmen. Dies legt nahe, dass Männer negative Erfahrungen aus Partnerschaften im Laufe der Zeit durch Ressourcen aus anderen Lebensbereichen kompensieren können, während die Abhängigkeit von sekundären Ressourcen aus früheren Partnerschaftserfahrungen bei Frauen mit dem Alter zunimmt. Wir schließen daraus, dass segregierte Geschlechterrollen ein hohes Risiko für eine niedrige Lebensqualität bei bestimmten Frauengruppen im höheren Alter bergen.

Schlagwörter: Lebenszufriedenheit, Partnerschaftsverläufe, Geschlechterrollen, Mittleres Alter, Kumulation Sozialer Ungleichheit

1 Introduction

Quality of life is a concept reflecting social inequalities beyond material resources and is thus of specific importance in postmodern societies, being sometimes even more relevant to individuals than financial or other material resources (Inglehart/Welzel 2005) and therefore at times an even better indicator for social inequality than the latter. Thieme and Dittrich (2015) found that differences in quality of life increase with age, likely resulting in new vulnerable groups among the elderly.

In ageing societies, quality of life in midlife and at higher ages is increasingly important, not only because it has a major influence on health (Dolan et al. 2008), potentially leading to severe financial challenges within health systems. From a social science perspective, the discrimination implicit in women reporting significantly lower life satisfaction than men at higher ages across demographic groups and global regions (Johanloo/Jovanović 2020) is especially alarming. Recent research by Montgomery (2022) even suggests that women are less satisfied throughout their lives; a fact hidden before due to gender-specific interpretations of happiness scales.

Theories of an uneven, stalled or two-part gender revolution (e.g. Freijka et al. 2018; Goldscheider et al. 2015) and related research emphasize that women are still more engaged in the private sphere, not least because gender norms urge them to be so, specifically in the context of male breadwinner models (Trappe et al. 2015). They are therefore also more likely to experience role conflicts (Goode 1976), foremost in the *rush hour* of life, in which career and family demands often clash drastically, leading in the main to a double burden and stress, as well as negative experiences and events (Buber et al. 2014). Additionally, the negative impacts of adverse life events are stronger among women than among men (Becchetti/Conzo 2022), specifically in the case of repeating events (Monk et al. 2018; Peters/Liefbroer 1997). We therefore have to assume that the negative impacts of these conflicts and stress are cumulative (Dannefer 2003) and that these effects are more visible at higher ages.

Prior studies however focused on specific events and did not analyze trajectories as a whole; we therefore do not know yet whether there are differences between men and women in the consequences of specific typical combinations of partnership-related events on satisfaction with life. This is however crucial, because life course events may have very different impacts on quality of life depending on the context in which they appear (Mayer 2001).

In sum, prior research on the impact of partnership on quality of life suffers from several shortcomings. *Firstly*, there was a failure to take into account the possibility that men and women might interpret scales of life satisfaction differently (as suggested by research of Montgomery 2022), indicating that separate models need to be calculated for men and women. Furthermore, negative impacts of adverse events are likely to be more pronounced among women (Becchetti/Conzo 2022), but often misinterpreted if the context is not taken into account (a *second* point). *Thirdly*, a focus on short-term effects of single or recurrent events of partnership formation or dissolution hinders a thorough evaluation of partnership experiences in a mid- and long-term perspective (Mayer 2001).