

How do relationship desire and sociability relate to each other among singles?

Longitudinal analysis of the Pairfam survey

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Abstract

This study examines the effect of relationship desire on singles' social lives and vice versa. Based on the German-based Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics study, never-married singles and divorced singles were analyzed. Cross-sectional results showed a correlation between the extent to which singles desire relationship and both the relative importance of friendships and overall social satisfaction. Further analysis, using longitudinal methods, showed that the move to a lower degree of relationship desire had a significant effect on the relative importance of friends. Furthermore, both higher levels of the relative importance of friends and social satisfaction are negatively correlated with relationship desire. These results clarify previous studies and point to the fact that singles with low relationship desire are more social and derive greater support from their friends.

Keywords

Friendship, loneliness, marital status, marriage, singles by choice, social life, social satisfaction

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Introduction

Marriage patterns have been changing worldwide. Many postpone marriage or choose other alternatives such as cohabitation (Esteve & Lesthaeghe, 2016), while some even choose to forgo intimate partnerships altogether and opt for singlehood (Adamczyk & Segrin, 2015; Moore & Radtke, 2015). The population of those who show low levels of relationship desire has largely been ignored as a separate group with its own particular characteristics. As marriage patterns are shifting, it is important to study how relationship desire appears in singles' lives and vice versa, how changes in life priorities relate to relationship desire.

One of the main questions regarding the population of those with low relationship desire is their sociability. On one side, there is evidence to suggest that singlehood is part of a growing phenomenon of networked individualism (Wellman, 2012). In fact, one of the possible explanations behind the trend of choosing singlehood is precisely this: the emergence of communities of singles and the increasing acceptance of social circles of singles (Kislev, 2019). Among younger singles, the role of friendship in everyday life is stronger, and often the emotional, social, material, and financial support traditionally derived from familial relationships comes from networks of friends (Bellotti, 2008). The creation of singles' networks is not limited to the younger generations: More recent studies observe that this pattern is emerging among middle-aged singles (Moore & Radtke, 2015) and seniors (Fileborn et al., 2015).

On the other side, Adamczyk (2017) suggested that some individuals choose to remain unmarried because they have avoidant or anxious attachment patterns. Apostolou (2017) shows that some of the reasons for which individuals stay single are that they struggle to start a relationship, including not knowing how to start a relationship, being shy, lacking confidence, and not being good at flirting. Another analysis of 6,794 Reddit responses in a thread (Apostolou, 2019) shows that men, in particular, list suboptimal flirting skills, low self-confidence, poor looks, shyness, low effort, and bad experience from previous relationships as reasons for staying single.

Moreover, previous studies showed that singles by choice are perceived more negatively than those who desire a relationship (Morris & Osburn, 2016; Slonim et al., 2015). In particular, they are perceived as more miserable and lonely than involuntary singles, while involuntary singles seem more friendly. One explanation for these findings is that singles with low relationship desire are thought to defy social norms and seek to distance themselves from mainstream society (Slonim et al., 2015).

Therefore, this study investigated the relationship between relationship desire and sociability and their two-sided effect. This was done by studying individuals over the age of 30, close to the mean age at first marriage in Germany. This is an age when there is typically a growing internal and external expectation of being married, and, thus, the social contexts of being married or unmarried is hypothesized to diverge (Kislev, 2018, 2019). The two main measures of sociability are the level of friend's relative importance to singles, and the outcome of sociability, measured as the level of social satisfaction, in the single population.

Relationship desire and the centrality of social life

When discussing the role of sociability in the lives of singles with low relationship desire, one should consider two opposing arguments. The first is that singles with weak relationship desire adopt this lifestyle due to avoidant patterns of behavior. Two kinds of attachment insecurity are observed in adults. Avoidant attachment is characterized by a fear of intimacy and excessive feelings of self-reliance which lead to actions that undermine the establishment of an intimate relationship. Anxious attachment is grounded in fear of abandonment that often results in intense distress when attachment needs are not being met. This distress, in turn, gives rise to behavioral patterns like ceaselessly seeking reassurance and a fear of rejection and anxiety. These patterns are detrimental to sustaining intimate partnerships (Pepping & MacDonald, 2019). Accordingly, Pepping and MacDonald (2019) postulated that a significant percentage of singles display an insecure attachment style and behavior patterns of avoidance, although the ones who are most highly functioning, also frequently present securely attached patterns (overall, there are more types of singles, based on any combination of high/low functioning and attachment styles).

These patterns of behavior might not only affect partnerships but also friendships. For example, in one study (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991), a semi-structured questionnaire was administered to 40 females and 37 males to describe their friendship patterns and their attachment styles. Findings showed that the fearful group was rated significantly lower than all other groups not only on self-disclosure, intimacy, and levels of romantic involvement, but also on friendship formation, and their reliance on others as a support system during difficult times.

On the other side, however, it is useful to look at some emerging understandings of the family (Weston, 1991). While there is little doubt that the family can play a crucial role in improving the welfare of people's lives, many overlook the reality that singles, especially long-term singles, often have networks that work very similarly to families (DePaulo, 2015). While the focal point of socialization in past times was the household, it is increasingly apparent that there has been a shift toward "personal networking units" as a way of connecting people and creating a social life. This shift has been referred to as networked individualism (Wellman, 2012), and describes the increasing emphasis on individuals' personal networks as a basis for their support system. This phenomenon stems from a growing number of singles creating their own communities and social networks (DePaulo, 2011; Kislev, 2019, in press).

The emergence of singles' communities may give singles an added advantage as they adapt faster to an environment that demands diversified social networks and places less emphasis on the centrality of the nuclear family (Bellotti, 2008; Fileborn et al., 2015). A study conducted by Amato et al. (2007) compared the differences in social behaviors between couples in 1980 and in the year 2000. Couples in the year 2000 were less likely to participate in a wide variety of activities together, such as visiting friends, working on house projects, and going out. Meanwhile, singles have become increasingly adept at building networks over a similar time. It would, therefore, seem that in recent times, married individuals are more isolated, while singles may be adapting to this new reality, ultimately leading to the increased importance of friends in their lives.

Moreover, singles are more likely to meet others by volunteering through civic organizations and charities. Klinenberg (2012) notes that this is especially true for women in relative terms, since marriage and cohabitation are less time-demanding for men. As a result, singles—especially females—have more diverse social networks and participate in volunteering activities significantly more often than their married counterparts. In a Dutch study (Kalmijn, 2003), nearly 3,000 adults under the age of 65 named up to five of their closest friends, not counting their partners or children. The results indicated that friendship networks become smaller when people start dating and get married.

While the findings above focus on the larger population of singles, there is limited evidence regarding the demographic of singles with low relationship desire. Even studies that succeed in differentiating voluntary singlehood are typically limited to a small number of respondents. The competing arguments presented here demand an empirical investigation into whether singles with low relationship desire are more avoidant and thus distance themselves from social circles, or only those who recognize their need for a support system and accordingly rate their friends as important, even crucial, part of their lives.

The implications of this question are clear. Social isolation, which refers to lacking a circle of friends and acquaintances that provide a sense of belonging, companionship, and membership in a community (Weiss, 1973), results in a variety of adverse outcomes. For example, social isolation may result in reduced mental and physical health, lower levels of social activities, and a lack of connection with one's local community (Newall et al., 2009; Scharf et al., 2005).

Therefore, the first hypothesis (H1.1) is that singles with low levels of relationship desire emphasize friendships in their lives more, relative to other domains in their lives. In addition, it is hypothesized that singles who increase their relative level of importance given to friendships from one year to the following year show a decrease in their relationship desire (H1.2). Finally, it is hypothesized that a move lower in relationship desire from one year to the following year increases rating friends' relative importance (H1.3).

Choosing singlehood and social satisfaction

The empirical question above is more complex than it appears. It is not enough to ask about the centrality of social life to singles with low relationship desire. It is also important to investigate the outcomes of their social efforts in terms of their levels of social satisfaction. In other words, no matter the value that singles with low relationship desire assign to their friends, there is another layer of examination, in which singles with weak relationship desire are examined by how satisfied they are from their actual social activities.

Indeed, the scale on which singles with low relationship desire should be compared to those with high relationship desire does not only move from isolation (stemming from avoidant behavior patterns as described above) to friendliness, two poles that are intuitive and are widely used. The scale also runs from low social satisfaction to high social satisfaction. These two conditions are further possibilities according to which the social life of singles with low relationship desire should be examined.

Proponents of marriage argue that living as a couple, or indeed as a family, helps to prevent situations of loneliness and isolation, which in turn can help to avoid anxiety, depression, and other health problems, especially in old age (Victor et al., 2000). Yet in direct contrast to loneliness, solitude can often be a positive state of mind that should be sought rather than avoided and shows high levels of social satisfaction although the relative importance given to friendships is not high (Coplan & Bowker, 2017; Nguyen et al., 2018). For example, when interviewing 180 children in Greece, researchers found that even at a young age, nearly 50% identified the motivational dimension and distinguished voluntary from involuntary aloneness (Galanaki, 2004).

Particularly among singles, one study shows that instead of focusing on the negative experiences of being alone, solitude can promote freedom, creativity, intimacy, and spirituality (Long & Averill, 2003). Singles, and especially those who appreciate the value of spending time alone, can benefit significantly from the circumstances that facilitate solitude that would otherwise be more elusive for individuals living with their partners. There is even evidence to suggest that singles, who are more accustomed to benefiting from time spent alone, are capable of being their own sources of comfort and security. However, further research is required to ascertain the mechanisms behind this phenomenon (DePaulo, 2014, 2015).

Yet, singles can also present low levels of social satisfaction and high levels of friends' importance. This means that although singles with weak relationship desire emphasize the importance of friendship, they are thought to fall short in forming sufficient social networks to satisfy their social needs. This can stem from a low number of potential friends available or as a result of greater social needs due to the lack of a partner. Indeed, Adamczyk (2016) concluded that perceived social support from a significant other was higher for those in partnered relationships than for single people. Those in nonmarital relationships felt more socially supported than single individuals. However, this might be considered a tautology because singles have no partner and, indeed, for the measure of perceived friend support, there was no significant difference between the single and partnered people.

In this sense, it is useful to consider here the definition of loneliness as "a discrepancy between one's desired and achieved levels of social relations" (Perlman & Peplau, 1981, p. 32). This discrepancy may concern the number of relationships or the level of intimacy in these connections (Fokkema et al., 2012). In this vein, loneliness is more of a subjective state, which can translate into a lack of friends and social deficits in personal terms, although forming friendships is a priority for the individual (Wenger et al., 1996).

Therefore, the second hypothesis (H2.1) is that singles with low relationship desire show high levels of social satisfaction. In addition, it is hypothesized that singles who increase their level of social satisfaction from one year to the following year show a decrease in their relationship desire (H2.2). However, it is not hypothesized that a move lower in relationship desire from one year to a following year increases social satisfaction (H2.3) because there should not be such an effect since social satisfaction is mostly an outcome of social activities and social meetings (Han et al., 2013; Portes, 2000; Putnam, 1995) rather than a life priority as in friendships importance. The German Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics (Pairfam) data set allows

for a detailed examination by measuring both the level of relationship desire and the two aspects of social life presented here.

Data

Data for this study come from the German Research Foundation (DFG)-funded Pairfam study (Brüderl et al., 2018; Huinink et al., 2011), in which the relevant variables can be found. The Pairfam project began by collecting a wide range of data on an annual basis for three age cohorts, starting in 2008/2009 with a sample of 12,400 participants. These participants included adolescents, young adults, and people in middle adulthood. The current study, however, includes only individuals who are older than 30 ($N = 5,944$), because 30 is close to the mean age of first marriage in Germany (CIA, 2017). Note that the cross-sectional analysis here uses repeated measures as separate data points (Poortman & Liefbroer, 2010) and offsets the wave effect by using hierarchical models where the survey round is on the higher level. The longitudinal analysis treats the database as a panel data where repeated observations are nested within individuals, and differences between are considered.

Participants

In the cross-sectional analysis, two groups of singles were examined: the never-married and the divorced/separated groups. The two groups were single, meaning that they even did not have a partner with whom they live apart together. These two groups are compared to cohabiting married people in the descriptive, as presented in Table 2.

The number of observations among married men and women is the highest, 7,888, and 10,845, respectively, followed by never-married men and women (2,589 and 1,704) and divorced men and women (539 and 1,112). The mean age of the divorced group was the highest, 39.01 for men and 38.88 for women, followed by married men and women, 38.19 and 37.80, respectively. The never-married men and women had the youngest mean age, 35.81 and 36.36, respectively.

In the longitudinal analyses, there was no need to account for sex and relationship status since the differences measured are within individuals. The number of observations in measuring the effect of relationship desire on social satisfaction was 3,066 nested within 1,052 individuals, while the number of observations in measuring the effect of relationship desire on friends' importance was 3,061 nested within 1,050 individuals (the small difference stems from responses availability). Similarly, the number of observations in measuring the effect of social satisfaction on relationship desire was 3,798 nested within 1,338 individuals, while the number of observations in measuring the effect of friendships' relative importance on relationship desire was 3,782 nested within 1,334 individuals.

Measures

The analyses presented below use several demographic and socioeconomic variables including gender, age, years of schooling, and subjective health assessment (ranging

from 1 = *bad* to 5 = *very good*) following previous studies' findings (Aysan & Aysan, 2017; Kislev, 2020; Kööts-Ausmees & Realo, 2015; Plouffe & Tremblay, 2017). Gender, in particular, is expected to play a significant role in moderating the association between choosing singlehood and sociability. For example, there is evidence to suggest that single women are more proficient at managing social capital than single men (Wenger et al., 2007), and this might also differentiate between men and women with varying degrees of choosing singlehood. Therefore, interaction terms are used to examine men and women separately in Table 3.

The independent variable at the focus of this study is the level of relationship desire, which is represented as choosing singlehood by reversing the scores given. This variable is represented by the degree to which respondents agree with the following statement: "I would like to have a partner." This question was given only to respondents who had not been in a relationship in the last 3 months and who did not experience a termination of their partnership due to death during the previous 3 months. The reversed scores reflect voluntary singlehood, and this item is thus rated on a scale ranging from 1 (*absolutely*) to 5 (*not at all*).

Two main dependent variables were in the focal view of this study. The first is the level of social satisfaction. This variable is measured using a 0 (*very dissatisfied*) to 10 (*very satisfied*) scale and stems from the question: "How satisfied are you with the following domains in your life (where the second domain is: "friends, social contact")?" Alongside social satisfaction, the relative importance of friends in life was measured using the following guidelines: "Please look at these five life goals and domains. How important are these to you personally at the moment? You have 15 importance points to distribute among the five goals and domains: pursuing my education or career interests, pursuing my hobbies and interests, keeping in touch with friends, living in a partnership, and having a(n)other child." This latter variable should be treated with cautious because the 15-point system of this question may result in collinearity. In particular, the independent variable of voluntary singlehood is expected to be correlated with the "living in partnership" domain in this 15-point system. In turn, the respondent is left with fewer points to distribute to other domains, including "keeping in touch with friends." Thus, although there is not a direct relation between points available on the five domains, this is still a concern and the interpretation may be limited. For this reason, the interpretation of the results should lean more heavily on the social satisfaction measure, which is the first dependent measure herein.

Analysis

While Tables 1 and 2, and Figures 1 and 2, present descriptive statistics, Table 3 presents a multilevel regression analysis to examine the associations between the two social indicators and choosing singlehood while accounting for several predictors as well as for the survey round on a higher level. In this way, Table 3 examines social activity as an outcome of choosing singlehood in interaction with gender to distinguish between men and women. This analysis is estimated separately for never-married and divorced respondents. All estimations herein were conducted with the Stata software, Version 15.1.

Table 1. Characteristics of never-married and divorced singles, men and women, age 30 and above.

Variable	Never-married and single		Divorced and single		Married and cohabitation	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
N	2,589	1,704	539	1,112	7,888	10,845
Mean age	35.81	36.36	39.01	38.88	38.19	37.80
Subjective health (1–5)	3.53	3.46	3.33	3.37	3.76	3.63
Years of education	13.02	13.52	12.21	12.46	13.71	13.55
% employed	0.80	0.77	0.79	0.76	0.95	0.75
Satisfied with income (1–5)	3.33	3.03	2.69	2.66	3.64	3.63
Mean number of children	0.04	0.47	0.62	1.44	1.68	1.81
Social satisfaction (0–10)	7.05	7.19	7.10	7.15	7.08	7.53
Friends' relative importance (0–15)	3.72	3.98	3.90	4.18	2.96	3.38
Relationship desire (1–5)	2.38	2.61	2.41	2.87		

Source. Own elaboration on Pairfam data sets, Waves 1–9, Version 9.1.

Table 2. Social characteristics by degree of relationship desire, age 30 and above.

Marital status	Degree of relationship desire	N	% Women	Mean age	Social satisfaction (0–10)	Friends' relative importance (0–15)
Never-married and single	1 (<i>absolutely</i>)	1,064	37	35.87	6.85	3.46
	2	1,111	33	35.73	7.05	3.70
	3	1,147	41	35.98	7.26	3.95
	4	511	46	36.77	7.30	4.26
	5 (<i>not at all</i>)	282	53	37.26	7.26	4.52
Divorced and single	1 (<i>absolutely</i>)	386	59	38.71	6.86	3.72
	2	285	62	38.84	6.99	3.88
	3	453	68	39.08	7.13	3.97
	4	212	71	39.19	7.27	4.54
	5 (<i>not at all</i>)	205	85	39.12	7.60	4.93
Married		18,733	58	37.97	7.34	3.20

Source. Own elaboration on Pairfam data sets, Waves 1–9, Version 9.1.

Results

Descriptive statistics

The characteristics of the sample population are presented in Table 1. Divorced men and women scored 3.33/5 and 3.37/5 points, respectively, on subjective health followed by never-married men (3.53/5) and women (3.46/5). The married and cohabiting men and women scored 3.76/5 for men and 3.63/5 for women. Married respondents presented 13.71 years of education on average for men and 13.55 years of education for women,

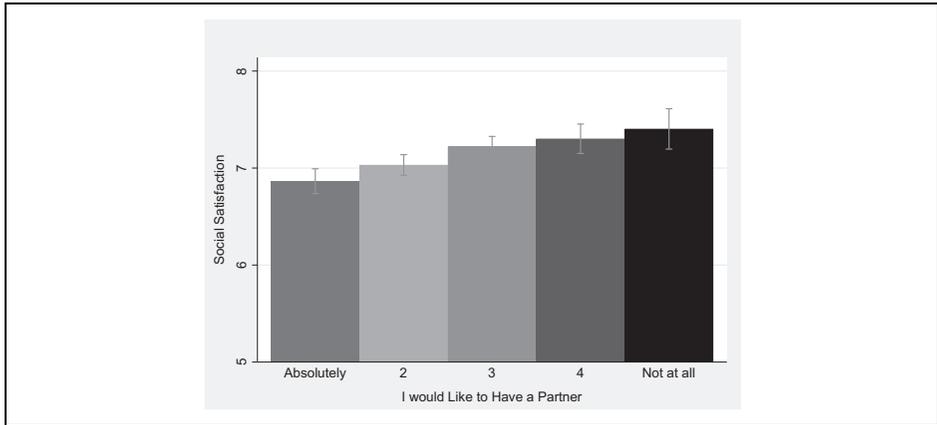


Figure 1. Social satisfaction over relationship desire. 95% confidence intervals.

Source: Own elaboration on Pairfam data sets, Waves 1–9, Version 9.1.

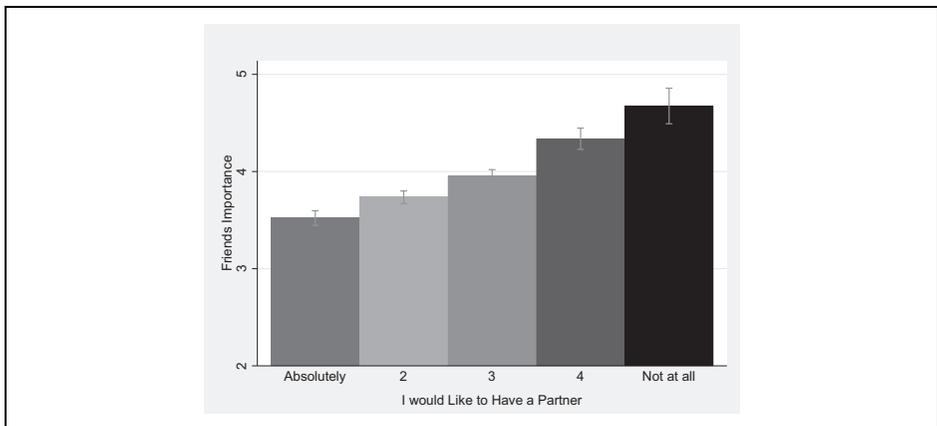


Figure 2. Friends' relative importance over relationship desire. 95% confidence intervals.

Source: Own elaboration on Pairfam data sets, Waves 1–9, Version 9.1.

compared with never-married men (13.02) and women (13.52) and with divorced men (12.21) and women (12.46).

In terms of employment, married people experienced rates of 95% for men and 75% for women, compared with never-married men (80%) and women (77%) and with divorced men (79%) and women (76%). Married men and women were satisfied with their income at 3.64/5 and 3.63/5 points, respectively, followed by never-married men and women (3.33/5 and 3.03/5), and divorced men and women (2.69/5 and 2.66/5). The mean number of children for married individuals was 1.68 children for men and 1.81 children for women, followed by divorced men and women (0.62 and 1.44, respectively) and never-married men and women (0.04 and 0.47, respectively).

Table 3. Multilevel analysis of social indicators, never-married and divorced, men and women, age 30 and above.

Variable	Never-married and single		Divorced and single	
	Social satisfaction	Friends' importance	Social satisfaction	Friends' importance
Age	-0.023** (0.008)	0.020*** (0.005)	-0.018 (0.017)	0.017 (0.012)
Subjective health	0.364*** (0.039)	-0.038 (0.026)	0.423*** (0.063)	-0.065 (0.044)
Years of education	-0.034* (0.014)	-0.010 (0.009)	-0.050* (0.024)	-0.052** (0.017)
Employed	0.610*** (0.099)	-0.054 (0.065)	0.253 (0.160)	-0.193 (0.112)
Satisfied with income	0.114*** (0.031)	0.044* (0.020)	0.191*** (0.051)	0.071* (0.036)
Number of children	-0.066 (0.072)	-0.042 (0.047)	0.075 (0.067)	0.067 (0.047)
Relationship desire	0.099** (0.037)	0.165*** (0.024)	0.127 (0.068)	0.300*** (0.048)
× Men				
Relationship desire	0.148*** (0.036)	0.299*** (0.024)	0.111* (0.048)	0.279*** (0.034)
× Women				
Constant	5.961*** (0.377)	2.732*** (0.244)	5.849*** (0.745)	3.432*** (0.527)
Variance SD wave	-2.741* (1.079)	-20.827** (7.253)	-16.889 (8.988)	-2.873* (1.464)
Variance SD residual	0.714*** (0.013)	0.289*** (0.013)	0.765*** (0.020)	0.408*** (0.021)
N	2,828	2,822	1,193	1,190

Source. Own elaboration on Pairfam data sets, Waves 1–9, Version 9.1.

Note: Standard errors in parentheses, coefficients are not standardized.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Focusing on social satisfaction, one can see that all groups are very similar. Married women rated themselves 7.53/10 points on social satisfaction, while married men rated themselves 7.08/10 points. In comparison, never-married men scored 7.05/10 points on average, while never-married women rated 7.19/10 points on average. Divorced men and women scored 7.1/10 and 7.15/10 points, respectively.

Somewhat in contrast to previous comparisons, divorced men and women scored 3.9/15 and 4.18/15 points, respectively, on the relative importance of friends item. This is in comparison to never-married men and women who scored 3.72/15 and 3.98/15 points, respectively. Married men and women scored 2.96/15 and 3.38/15 points, respectively.

One variable was studied specifically among the groups of singles. Women who were divorced preferred singlehood at 2.87/5 points, followed by never-married women who scored 2.61/5 points. Similarly, divorced men preferred singlehood at an average of 2.41/5 points while never-married men scored 2.38/5 points on average.

Descriptive statistics for low/high relationship desire

While Table 1 presents overall descriptive statistics for the groups, Table 2 distinguishes between those who are more or less content with singlehood. Besides separating the levels of choosing singlehood, it appears (still descriptively) that the levels of social satisfaction and friends' relative importance are higher with higher levels of choosing singlehood. This is the focal point of this study and is thus estimated and illustrated in Figures 1 and 2.

In these figures, an analysis was conducted consisting of a range from absolutely wanting to have a partner to the highest level of disinterest in having a partner (x -axis), while the y -axis shows the level of the chosen social indicator. The outcomes of the analysis depicted a negative correlation between wanting to have a partner and both social satisfaction and the relative importance of friends. Those who absolutely wanted to have a partner were the least satisfied socially and placed their friends lower on their priorities, while those who displayed the least interest in a relationship presented the highest levels of both social indicators. These results are further examined in the analyses presented below.

Statistical analyses of social satisfaction by relationship desire

Multilevel analyses were estimated in Table 3 to find the association between choosing singlehood and the two social indicators under examination, accounting for other, related variables such as age, subjective health, years of education, employment, income satisfaction, and the number of children. An interaction term of gender and choosing singlehood was used to account for the correlations with men and women separately.

Findings show that age negatively correlates with social satisfaction ($B = -.023$; $p < .01$) and positively correlates with friends' relative importance ($B = .02$; $p < .001$) among the never-married, while it shows no significant correlation with the two social indicators among the divorced group. Subjective health rating positively correlates with social satisfaction among all singles ($B = .364$; $p < .001$ for never-married and $B = .423$; $p < .001$ for the divorced group). Years of education negatively correlate with social satisfaction among the never-married men ($B = -.034$; $p < .05$), and among the divorced group ($B = -.05$; $p < .05$), and with friends' relative importance among the divorced group alone ($B = -.052$; $p < .01$). Employment is only positively correlated with social satisfaction among the never-married group ($B = .61$; $p < .001$). Among both groups, income satisfaction positively correlates with social satisfaction ($B = .114$; $p < .001$ for the never-married and $B = .191$; $p < .001$ for the divorced) and the relative importance of friends ($B = .044$; $p < .05$ for the never-married and $B = .071$; $p < .05$ for the divorced).

H1.1 and H2.1 concern the associations between choosing singlehood and the two social variables under examination: social satisfaction and the relative importance of friends. Indeed, the statistical analysis depicted a positive correlation between choosing singlehood and social satisfaction among never-married men ($B = .099$; $p < .01$) and women ($B = .148$; $p < .001$) as well as among divorced women ($B = .111$; $p < .05$), while among divorced men this correlation was only marginally significant ($B = .127$; $p < .061$), mostly due to their smaller number. Similarly, the statistical analysis depicted a positive correlation between choosing singlehood and the relative importance of friends among never-married men ($B = .165$; $p < .001$) and women ($B = .299$; $p < .001$) as well as among divorced men ($B = .3$; $p < .001$) and divorced women ($B = .279$; $p < .001$).

Panel data models

Finally, this line of investigation should be taken further in a longitudinal analysis. While Table 3 shows that scoring low on wanting to have a partner correlates with friends'

Table 4. Panel data analysis (fixed effect) of social indicators and relationship desire, age 30 and above.

Variable	Social indicators		Relationship desire	
	Social satisfaction	Friends' importance	Model 1	Model 2
Age	-0.070** (0.021)	0.040* (0.017)	0.013 (0.011)	0.012 (0.011)
Subjective health	0.102* (0.044)	-0.025 (0.035)	0.029 (0.022)	0.031 (0.022)
Years of education	0.153 (0.090)	0.093 (0.070)	-0.058 (0.045)	-0.054 (0.045)
Employed	0.051 (0.123)	-0.017 (0.097)	-0.046 (0.060)	-0.043 (0.060)
Satisfied with income	-0.011 (0.042)	-0.005 (0.033)	-0.024 (0.021)	-0.022 (0.021)
Number of children	-0.086 (0.186)	0.082 (0.147)	0.193* (0.079)	0.198* (0.080)
Number of previous partners	0.127 (0.167)	-0.036 (0.131)	0.029 (0.062)	0.034 (0.062)
Δ Relationship desire	0.027 (0.027)	0.076*** (0.021)		
Δ Social satisfaction			0.014* (0.007)	
Δ Friends' relative importance				0.025*** (0.009)
Constant	7.081*** (1.311)	1.403 (1.029)	2.702*** (0.652)	2.668*** (0.651)
N (observations)	3,066	3,061	3,798	3,782
N (individuals)	1,052	1,050	1,338	1,334
σ_u	1.93	1.32	1.09	1.08
σ_e	1.44	1.13	0.80	0.80
ρ	0.64	0.58	0.65	0.65
R ² within	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01
R ² between	0.01	0.00	0.03	0.03
R ² overall	0.00	0.00	0.03	0.03

Source. Own elaboration on Pairfam data sets, Waves 1–9, Version 9.1.

Note: Standard errors in parentheses, coefficients are not standardized.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

relative importance and social satisfaction, it still does not show the effects the variables have on each other. For this reason, Table 4 presents the results of a longitudinal analysis while looking at the panel structure of the data set. In this way, each individual surveyed carried repeated measures in the next waves in responding to the questions at hand. These recurring measures are nested within an individual, and using a panel data analysis, one can estimate whether a move to higher or lower degrees of relationship desire relates to the two social aspects and vice versa. Note that Table 4 does not include gender and relationship status as it is a fixed effect analysis. However, Table 4 does include the previous number of partners a respondent had as it might affect prospective relationship desire (this measure is not shown to be significant though).

Indeed, the first two columns present the effect of relationship desire (choosing singlehood) on the two social aspects at hand. After accounting for related factors, a positive difference in the degree of choosing singlehood between one round of survey to the following one showed a positive effect on friends' relative importance ($B = .076$; $p < .001$). However, and as expected, a difference in the degree of choosing singlehood from one round of survey to the following one showed no effect on social satisfaction.

The next two columns present the results of the opposite direction: how a move in friends' relative importance and social satisfaction from one round of survey to the following one relates to the degree of choosing singlehood. Indeed, Table 4 shows that a positive move in friends' relative importance from one round of survey to the following one is positively associated with a higher level of choosing singlehood (a lower level of relationship desire) ($B = .014$; $p < .05$). Similarly, a positive move in social satisfaction is also positively associated with a higher level of choosing singlehood ($B = .025$; $p < .01$). Also, see Appendix Table A1 for similar results of within and between effects.

Discussion

This study aimed to estimate the effect of relationship desire on social satisfaction and the relative importance of friends and, in turn, how these latter indicators relate to relationship desire. By doing this, this study fills the gap in the literature on this group and expands the research on the growing population of those who consciously choose singlehood (DePaulo, 2007; Klinenberg, 2012), based on the detailed data of the Pairfam survey.

The results of this study showed that singles with low relationship desire have higher levels of social satisfaction, while also considering friendships more important (H1.1 and H2.1). More accurately, there is a negative correlation between wanting a relationship and social satisfaction as well as friends' relative importance. Conversely, relationship desire is negatively correlated with both social indicators.

In addition, longitudinal analyses presented in this study showed that singles who increase their level of social satisfaction as well as their relative importance of friendships from one year to the following one showed a decrease in their relationship desire (H1.2 and H2.2). Furthermore, a move lower in relationship desire from one year to a subsequent year was shown to increase rating friends' relative importance (H1.3). However, the same move was not shown to increase social satisfaction. This is explained by the fact that social satisfaction is mostly an outcome of social activities and social meetings (Han et al., 2013; Portes, 2000; Putnam, 1995) rather than a life priority as in friendships importance. In other words, a change in life priority is expected to relate to the prioritization of relationships, while being more or less satisfied socially is not directly related to relationship desire.

These results clarify previous studies that point to a phenomenon of rising singles' networks and communities (DePaulo, 2011; Kislev, in press). It appears that singles with low relationship desire are those who mainly focus on social support from friendships and make them central to their lives. In addition, once singles choose singlehood more adamantly, they turn to their friends and emphasize their role in their lives. Similarly, singles who are more socially satisfied and place their friends higher in the hierarchy of their life priorities, lower their desire for relationship and choose singlehood more strongly.

It might well be that singles with low relationship desire transfer some of the assumed responsibilities of the nuclear family to their networks of friends (Bellotti, 2008; Fileborn et al., 2015). These findings also defy common negative perceptions of singles with low relationship desire as having social difficulties, as documented by previous studies

(Morris & Osburn, 2016; Slonim et al., 2015). Of course, friendships can provide only certain needs, but the array of such addressed needs can be quite broad including social company, emotional support, and intellectual stimulation. Indeed, some predict that the offerings of friendship will widen even more with growing trends toward delaying marriage, remaining single, and separating, with friendship becoming a source of physical care and financial provision (DePaulo, 2015).

In future studies, these results should be explored further in interviews and ethnographic studies to understand the nuances of the social lives of singles with low relationship desire. It is hard to define singles with weak relationship desire in exact numbers and therefore, it is shown on a scale in this study. However, Table 2 shows that their share in the larger single population is around 20% if those rated 4 and 5 on the reversed scale of wanting to have a partner are counted as singles with low relationship desire. This is a notable part of the adult singles population that currently approaches 50% of the total population (Klinenberg, 2012).

Therefore, this population deserves more attention in future studies to fully understand the mechanisms of their social lives. These studies should address the questions of how singles create communities, how they derive social support from their friends and wider family, and how these new constructs relate to their overall well-being over their life span. Furthermore, future studies could allow for a further explanation of potential moderating variables, such as the place of residence (e.g., rural areas vs. metropolitans), personality traits, social norms, and other factors that were not covered in this current study due to data limitations.

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Open research statement

As part of IARR's encouragement of open research practices, the author(s) have provided the following information: This research was not pre-registered. The data used in the research are available. The data can be obtained at: <https://www.pairfam.de/en/data/>.

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Appendix

Table A1. Panel data analysis (within and between effects) of social indicators and relationship desire, age 30 and above.

Variable	Social indicators		Relationship desire	
	Social satisfaction	Friends' importance	Model 1	Model 2
Age	−0.029** (0.010)	0.030*** (0.007)	0.019*** (0.005)	0.019*** (0.005)
Subjective health	0.221*** (0.037)	−0.025 (0.028)	0.056** (0.018)	0.059** (0.018)
Years of education	−0.008 (0.020)	−0.014 (0.014)	−0.031** (0.010)	−0.031** (0.010)
Employed	0.278** (0.098)	−0.051 (0.073)	−0.030 (0.049)	−0.030 (0.049)
Satisfied with income	0.069* (0.032)	0.032 (0.023)	0.003 (0.016)	0.004 (0.016)
Number of children	−0.013 (0.065)	0.111* (0.046)	0.149*** (0.031)	0.150*** (0.031)
Number of previous partners	0.016 (0.032)	−0.010 (0.023)	−0.027 (0.016)	−0.029 (0.016)
Δ Relationship desire	0.011 (0.026)	0.066** (0.020)		
Δ Social satisfaction			0.013 (0.007)	
Δ Friends' relative importance				0.030*** (0.009)
Constant	7.018*** (0.467)	2.977*** (0.333)	2.059*** (0.241)	2.059*** (0.241)
N (observations)	3,066	3,061	3,798	3,782
N (individuals)	1,052	1,050	1,338	1,334
σ_{μ}	1.48	1.00	0.90	0.90
σ_e	1.44	1.13	0.80	0.80
ρ	0.51	0.44	0.56	0.56
R ² within	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01
R ² between	0.07	0.02	0.04	0.04
R ² overall	0.05	0.02	0.04	0.05

Source. Own elaboration on Pairfam data sets, Waves 1–9, Version 9.1.

Note: Standard errors in parentheses, coefficients are not standardized.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.