

Extended Abstract for European Population Conference 2026

Trajectories of Self-Esteem in Never-Partnered Adolescents and Young Adults: Links to Patterns of Friendship Satisfaction and Satisfaction with Singlehood

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Introduction

Starting a romantic relationship has been one of the common and socially valued key transition events in the life course to adulthood (Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011; Hogan & Astone, 1986). However, singlehood, not being in a romantic relationship, has been becoming increasingly common worldwide (Bellani et al., 2017). Nevertheless, single individuals still face stigma (i.e., singlism) ranging from exclusion from financial benefits that has been offered to couples (DePaulo & Morris, 2005) to negative perceptions such as being less well-adjusted, more socially immature, and more self-centered (Morris et al., 2008), as well as experiencing greater social exclusion and unsolicited advice compared to their coupled peers (Girme et al., 2022). Moreover, single individuals report lower well-being such as lower life satisfaction and higher loneliness on average compared to (eventually) partnered individuals (Gonzalez Avilés et al., 2021; Krämer et al., 2025; Stahnke & Cooley, 2021; Stern et al., 2024). Yet the question remains: Are there never-partnered individuals who thrive as well?

While comparisons between partnered and single individuals highlight informative average differences, such comparisons risk interpreting singlehood as a general deficit and overlook the diverse experiences of modern single individuals and the possibility that singlehood can

be a fulfilling life path. Researchers increasingly acknowledge that single individuals represent a heterogeneous population rather than a monolithic group (Adamczyk, 2021; Girme et al., 2023). Emerging studies reveal that certain groups of single individuals report levels of well-being that are comparable to or even higher than those of partnered individuals (Oh et al., 2022; Walsh et al., 2023). In the present research, our first aim is to contribute this emerging literature by identifying different developmental trajectories of self-esteem within never-partnered individuals across adolescence and young adulthood. Self-esteem reflects subjective judgments about one's own worth relative to others (Leary & Baumeister, 2000) and has been associated with wide-ranging positive consequences including better social relationships, and better mental and physical health (Orth & Robins, 2022). Because self-esteem inherently includes a social comparison aspect in its formation, it is a unique and promising positive construct to investigate thriving within singles. Our second aim is to examine whether singles who follow distinct self-esteem trajectories show different patterns of friendship satisfaction and satisfaction with singlehood over time. By investigating these questions, we contribute to literature in three key ways: (1) We offer a novel perspective by focusing on the heterogeneity of self-esteem development within never-partnered singles, rather than treating them as a comparison group to partnered individuals. (2) We use a longitudinal panel design spanning approximately 14 years across adolescence and young adulthood, thereby extending beyond cross-sectional or short-term approaches. This allows for deeper insights into self-esteem development in singles. (3) We link distinct self-esteem trajectories to patterns of friendship satisfaction and satisfaction with singlehood, enabling us to explore their relevance and uncover characteristics of thriving in singlehood.

Research Questions

- 1) Are there distinct developmental trajectories of self-esteem within never-partnered singles across adolescence and young adulthood?

- 2) Do these self-esteem trajectories among never-partnered individuals differ in their patterns of friendship satisfaction over time?
- 3) Do these self-esteem trajectories among never-partnered individuals differ in their patterns of satisfaction with singlehood over time?

Hypotheses

- 1) We will explore the presence of distinct self-esteem trajectories among never-partnered individuals without formulating specific expectations regarding their number or pattern.
- 2) We expect that changes in friendship satisfaction with singlehood will align with the distinct self-esteem trajectories. That is, individuals with increasing friendship satisfaction will report increasing self-esteem, while those with declining friendship satisfaction will report decreasing self-esteem.
- 3) We expect that changes in satisfaction with singlehood will align with the distinct self-esteem trajectories. That is, individuals with increasing satisfaction with singlehood will report increasing self-esteem, while those with declining satisfaction with singlehood will report decreasing self-esteem.

Data and Methods

The present study uses data from the German Family Panel (pairfam), release 14.2 (Brüderl et al., 2023). Pairfam collected yearly between 2008 until the panel was stopped in 2022. We select participants who were between 15-17 years old when they entered the study, initial sample size is approximately 4,300 individuals at T1 prior to applying any selection criteria. Since our study focuses on never-partnered individual's self-esteem trajectories, we exclude people who indicated a current or past romantic relationship at the time of first assessment. We select participants who have provided information on self-esteem, friendship satisfaction

and satisfaction with singlehood at least once across the yearly assessments. We will observe people from their entry into the panel until 1) they do not respond anymore because it is the final year of observation (2022 for pairfam) or they stopped participating, 2) they start a relationship.

The aim of the current study is to identify subgroups of singles which differ with respect to the way self-esteem develops across age. A common statistical approach for finding subgroups using longitudinal data is the latent class growth model. Since we are interested in never-partnered singles who stay single during data collection period, we use a joint latent class modelling approach (Proust-Lima et al., 2014), similar to one used in Özoruç et al., 2025. This approach models the (discrete time) hazard rate of starting a relationship simultaneously with the self-esteem trajectory. Latent classes will be allowed to differ not only with respect to their self-esteem trajectory, but in order to deal with the selection effect also, with respect to the probability of starting a relationship (conditional of not starting a relationship yet). After determining the optimal number of classes, individuals can be classified into latent classes based on their posterior membership probabilities.

To answer our second and third research questions, we investigate the growth patterns for friendship satisfaction and satisfaction with singlehood within the encountered self-esteem trajectory classes. For this purpose, we use a novel type of step-three model, which allows account for classification uncertainty in the class assignments (Vermunt, 2010). We explore how the trajectories differ on friendship satisfaction change and satisfaction with singlehood change over time by comparing changes in friendship satisfaction and satisfaction with singlehood across different trajectories.

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