

Are Single Adults Left Behind? Partnership Status and Compounded Disadvantage in Parental Support Across European Welfare Regimes

Extended Abstract / European Population Conference 2026

1. Introduction and Research Gap

Intergenerational support has become a critical mechanism shaping inequality among adult children in contemporary Europe. As welfare state retrenchment and economic precarity grow, private intergenerational transfers have become crucial for their economic security, housing access, and overall well-being (Albertini & Kohli, 2013; Mudrazija, 2014). However, the distribution of these resources is not equal. This raises questions about how family support systems may reproduce or compensate for broader patterns of social stratification, particularly along the lines of partnership status.

As the proportion of single adults rises across European societies (Eurostat, 2025), understanding how partnership status relates to parental support has become increasingly important. Growing research documents economic and health disparities between partnered and single adults (Bernardi & Mortelmans, 2021; DePaulo & Morris, 2005). Partnered individuals benefit not only from shared household resources and economies of scale but also from access to dual family networks and mutual support systems. Single adults, by contrast, often rely more heavily on parental transfers to manage economic shocks, housing transitions, or caregiving responsibilities.

Despite growing recognition of partnership status as a source of inequality, research has largely overlooked how parental transfers interact with partnership to create compounded disadvantage. This study addresses this gap by examining whether partnership status is associated with stratified access to parental support across three key dimensions: financial, practical, and emotional support, and whether these patterns vary systematically across European institutional contexts.

The central theoretical contribution lies in conceptualizing partnership-based inequality not as an isolated disadvantage but as a potentially compounded one: single adults may

face double disadvantage when limited partner resources overlap with reduced parental support. Understanding these dynamics is essential for assessing how private safety nets function in different welfare regime contexts and whether family support systems mitigate or exacerbate partnership-based inequalities.

2. Theoretical Framework

The concept of compounded disadvantage builds on cumulative inequality theory (Dannefer, 2003; DiPrete & Eirich, 2006), which emphasizes how disadvantages accumulate across the life course through interconnected mechanisms. A core principle of the life course perspective is that lives are fundamentally linked and changes in one generation cascade to others (Elder, 1994; Settersten, 2015). Applied to intergenerational support, this framework suggests that single adults face not only the direct economic consequences of lacking a partner's income and resources but may also receive systematically different levels of parental support compared to partnered adults.

Empirical research suggests competing theoretical predictions regarding how partnership status shapes parental support. Some research finds that unmarried adults receive more financial and practical support than married adults, consistent with a compensatory model where parents respond to children's greater economic vulnerability (e.g. Swartz, 2009; Lee & Aytac, 1998; Hogan et al., 1993). Alternatively, single adults may receive less support if parents view their circumstances as less stable or anticipate limited reciprocity, making investment in partnered children appear as more 'efficient' investments due to economies of scale and potential for future returns (Leopold & Raab, 2011). Which pathway prevails likely depends on institutional context, with efficiency considerations expected to dominate in Southern European regimes where constrained resources necessitate selective allocation, while Nordic welfare states may buffer such inequalities.

These dynamics highlight how the interaction of economic vulnerability, family integration, and parental allocation can compound disadvantages for single adults, which may be further shaped by institutional and welfare contexts across Europe. Institutional context fundamentally shapes both the need for private transfers and the cultural norms governing family obligations (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Saraceno & Keck, 2010). Following Albertini & Kohli (2013), European countries can be classified into three transfer regimes: Nordic (strong welfare state, individual independence norms), Continental (moderate welfare, strong familialism), and Southern (limited welfare, high familialism).

3. Data and Methods

3.1 Data Source

The analysis uses data from SHARE Wave 9 (2021–2022), which collected 69,154 individual interviews in 47,957 households across 28 European countries. SHARE provides comprehensive information on intergenerational transfers reported by parents aged 50+ about support given to their adult children. The analytical sample includes parents aged 50–85 with at least one adult child aged 25+ living outside the parental household. This restriction focuses on transfers to independent adults while excluding young adults who may still be completing education or co-residing with parents.

3.2 Key Variables

Dependent variables

- capture three dimensions of downward intergenerational transfers: financial transfers, practical support, and emotional support

Independent variable:

- partnership status: partnered (married or cohabiting), single (never married), and formerly partnered (divorced, separated, or widowed), further differentiated by the presence of dependent children (e.g., partnered with/without children; single with/without children)

Control variables

- include socioeconomic characteristics (parental education, income, employment), demographic factors (age, gender), and family characteristics (number of children, geographic proximity, contact frequency). The number of children is included to capture potential dilution of parental resources across multiple offspring (Becker & Tomes, 1976)

3.3 Analytical Strategy

The analysis proceeds in three stages:

1. **Descriptive analysis:** Cross-tabulations and graphical displays examine the relationship between partnership status and each type of parental transfer across regimes, providing initial evidence of disparities.
2. **Multivariate models:** Two-level logistic regression models (children nested within parents) are estimated separately for each transfer type and each regime, controlling for socioeconomic, demographic, and family characteristics.

- 3. Robustness checks:** Sensitivity analyses will assess whether results hold when using alternative regime classifications (e.g., Dykstra & Fokkema, 2011) and when examining selected countries individually to identify potential deviations from regime-level patterns.

4. Research Hypotheses and Contributions

4.1 Research Hypotheses

Based on theoretical frameworks and existing literature, I expect to find:

H1: In Southern regimes, the largest gaps are expected (OR \approx 0.50-0.70), consistent with compounded disadvantage in contexts where both welfare and family resources are limited. **H2:** Financial support patterns are expected to vary systematically across regimes, from the highest partnership-based equality in Nordic regimes (OR \approx 1.0) to the lowest in Southern regimes (OR \approx 0.60). **H3:** Single adults in Southern regimes are expected to experience compounded disadvantage across multiple support dimensions simultaneously, whereas Nordic regimes are anticipated to show minimal partnership-based disparities.

4.2 Contributions

This study explores how intergenerational support differs by partnership status, potentially contributing to compounded disadvantage among single adults. Using cross-national data and multilevel methods, it highlights disparities in multiple forms of support and the role of institutional context. Understanding these dynamics is essential for assessing how private safety nets operate across welfare regimes and for evaluating whether family support systems are associated with greater or lesser partnership-based inequalities.

5. Limitations

This study's cross-sectional design precludes causal inference; observed associations may reflect selection processes rather than partnership status effects. Parent-reported measures may be subject to recall bias, and the 12-month reference period may miss irregular transfers. Despite these limitations, the study provides important insights into how partnership status intersects with institutional contexts to shape support patterns across Europe.

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