

# Between Loneliness and Freedom:

## The Psychological Cost of Living Alone for Middle-Aged Europeans

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# How Life is Organized

## **In late modern societies**

- Life in households 1+
- Mixed gender roles
- Urban social life
- Variety of lifestyles
- 'Liquid' relations
- The individual decides

## **In traditional societies**

- Life in towns, villages
- Traditional gender roles
- Agricultural calendar
- Collectivism /  
people do the same
- Extended or nuclear families

# The Rise of Singles

- The fastest growing part of the population/  
'majority of households in the US'
  - Settled in urban colonies
  - Using mutual help of friendship &  
neighbourhood networks
- 
- But -- linked with worse health, lower mood
  - And yet continually growing over time
  - Even with freedom, the risks of singles are  
higher. Why popular then?

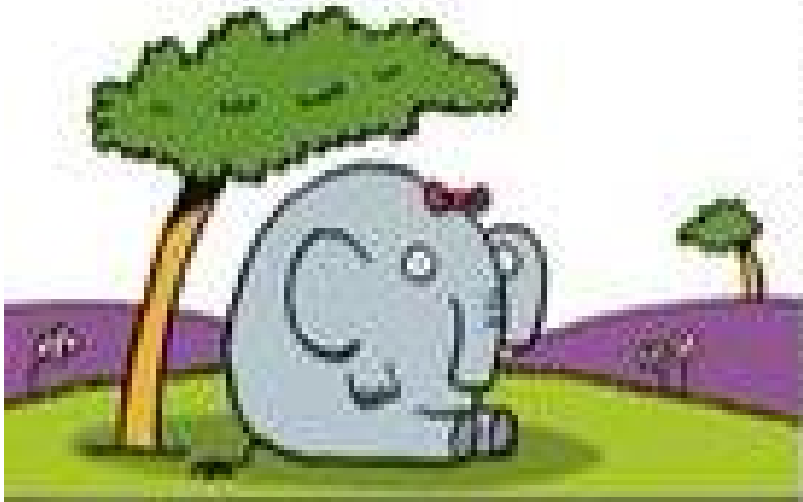
# Two types of singles

(Kuepper 2000; Busch & Deimer 1994)

**unwilling**

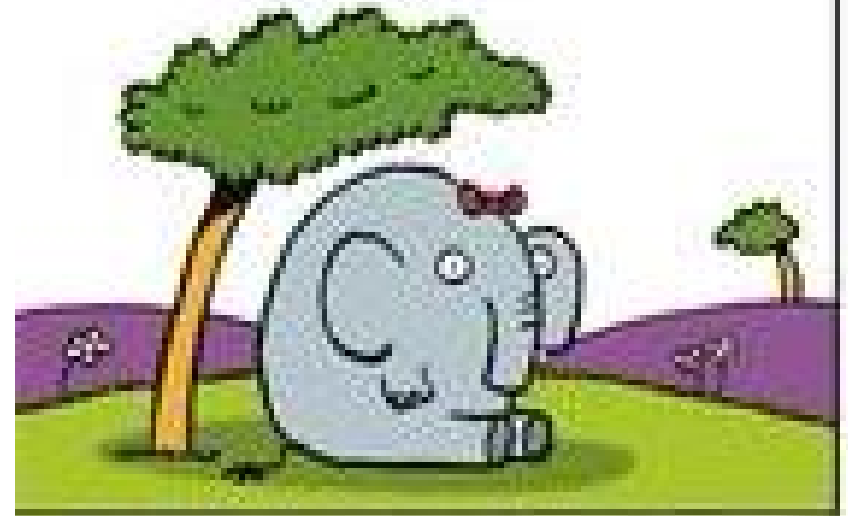
**Unhappy being alone,  
Elly Elephant wanted a  
man who would listen.**

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**voluntary**

**Elly Elephant learned  
to be happy alone.**



# Two types of singles

(Kuepper 2000; Busch & Deimer 1994)

## **Unwilling singles**

- Would rather live with someone
- Unhappy about being single
- Do not identify
- Do not belong
- Egoistic
- Singles by necessity

## **Voluntary singles**

- Are glad to live on their own
- Happy about being single
- Enjoy
- Belong
- Altruist
- Singles by choice

# Unpacking the 'singles' problem in the literature

3

individualism

2

individualization

thesis



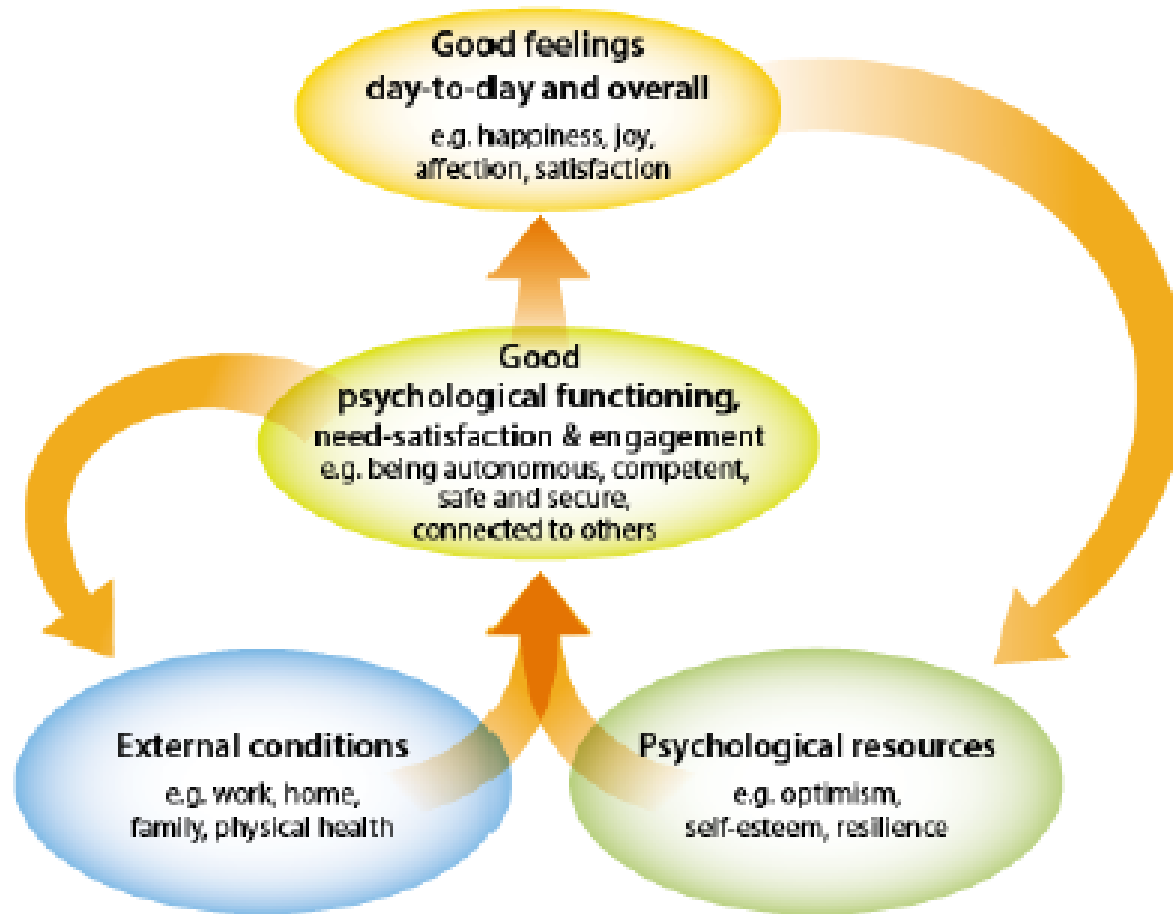
Beck's idea that the individual is becoming the centre of life

1

singles

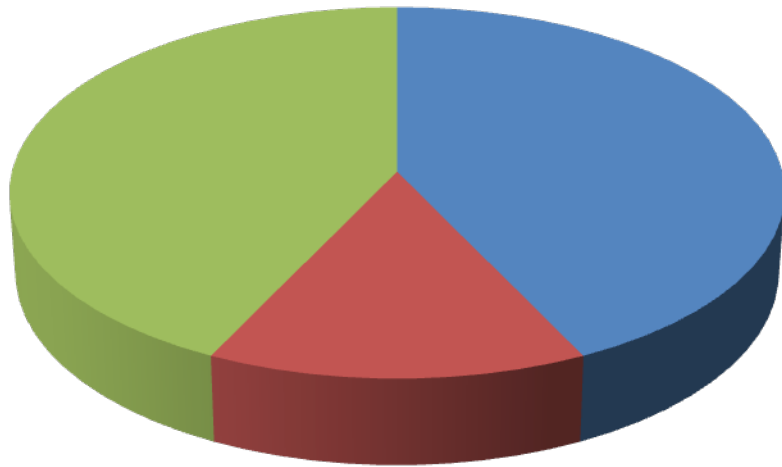
Their mode of life  
values  
marital patterns  
consumption, etc.

# Theoretical model of Well-Being (Huppert et al. 2013)



Based on a figure in Thompson and Marks (2008)<sup>21</sup>.

# Singles by Regions of Europe



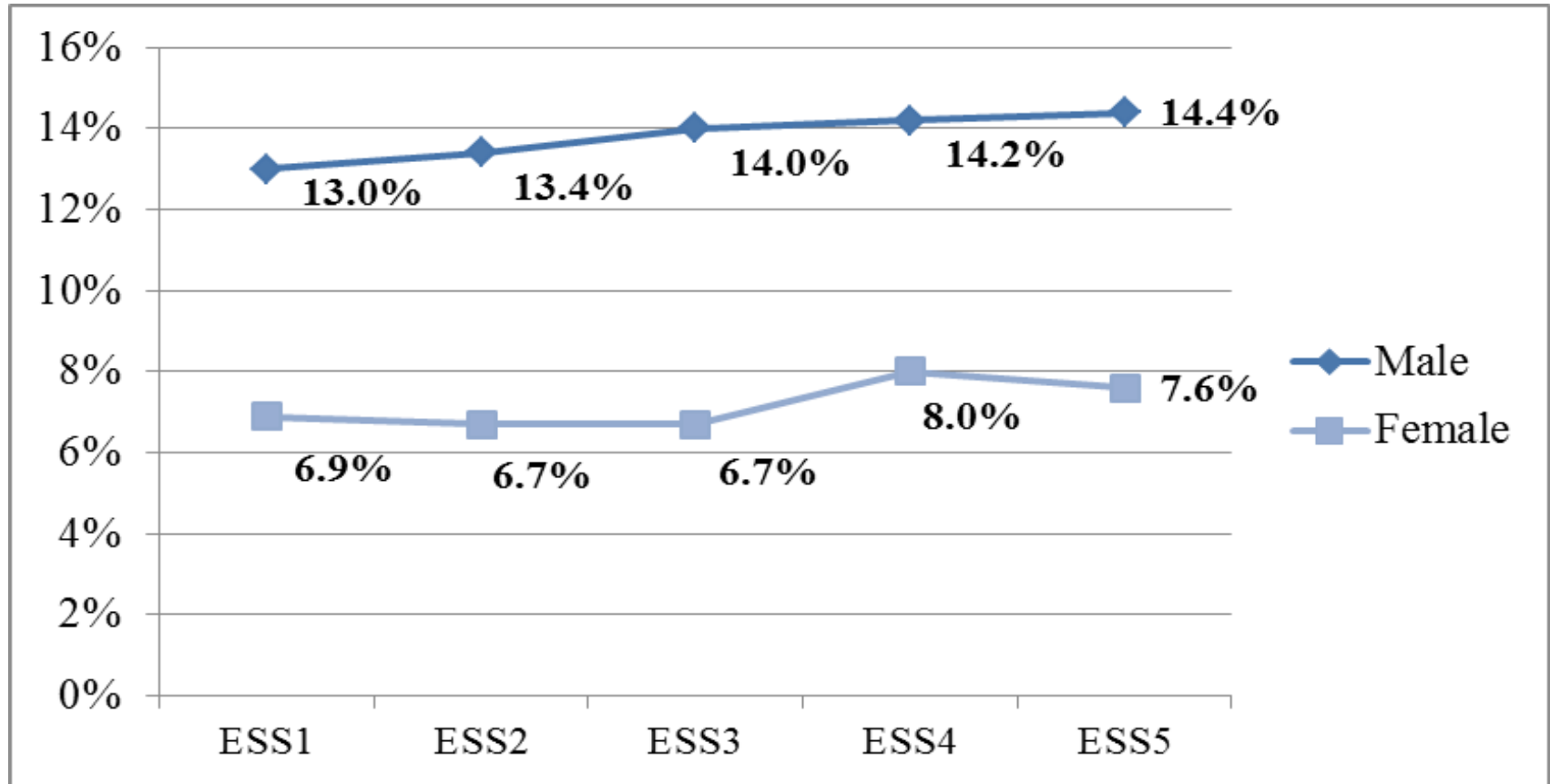
- Regions defined after Therborn (2004) in the sample:
- **Northwestern** (47%)
- **Southern** (10%)
- **Eastern** (43%)
- Singles by regions:  
**12%** - **7%** - **5%**



# Data and Method

- European Social Survey 2006, 2012
- Cross-sectional, weighted samples
- Repeated in 22 European countries
- \*a special module on well-being
- - if no relevant effects are found, then national panel data (compared) , e.g. RU, CH

# Singles in population (2002-2010)



\*All the ESS countries

# Trust

- Most people **can be trusted (10)**:
  - **Northwestern: Singles 5.2 Others 5.1**
  - **South: S 5.1 O 5.0**
  - **Eastern: S 4.1 O 4.2**
- Most of the time people **helpful (10)**:
  - **Northwestern: Singles 5.0 Others 5.1**
  - **South: S 4.4 O 4.4**
  - **Eastern: S 4.1 O 4.2**

# Happiness

- How happy are you (0-10):
  - Northwestern: **Singles 6.6** Others 7.6
  - South: **S 6.8** O 7.5
  - Eastern: **S 5.5** O 6.3
- Felt happy past week (male, %, most or all the time):
  - Northwestern: **Singles 59** Others 77
  - South: **S 52** O 73
  - Eastern: **S 54** O 67

# Loneliness

- Felt **lonely past week** (males, %, most or all the time):
  - Northwestern: **Singles 12 Others 3**
  - South: **S 15 O 4**
  - Eastern: **S 29 O 11**

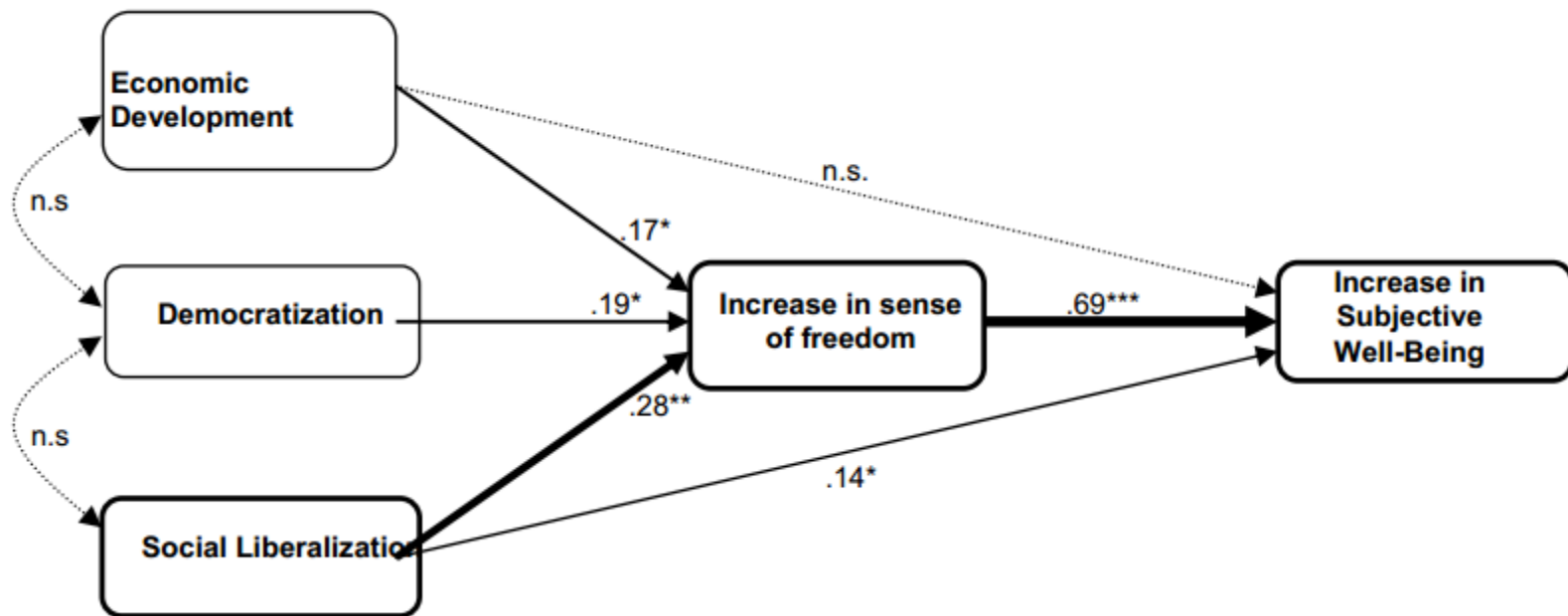
# Civic attitudes/networks

- **Help people** and care for others' well-being ('like me' or 'very much like me', males, %):
  - Northwestern: **Singles 59** Others 65
  - South: **S 83** O 81
  - Eastern: **S 40** O 52
- Important to **make own decisions** and be free:
  - Northwestern: **Singles 80** Others 65
  - South: **S 83** O 74
  - Eastern: **S 75** O 69

# Summary

- The proportion of singles might have grown for the last 50 years
- The 2000s data do not show a rapid growth
- On average, singles are less happy, more lonely, less caring for others.

# But we know that freedom increases well-being



(Inglehart, Foa, Peterson, Welzel 2008)



# Hypothesis

There must be some representation of a greater freedom among singles measured by:

- SEV
- other individual and contextual measures of tolerance and freedom
- If singles are found persistently and mostly to be of the “unwilling” type, dissatisfied and frustrated, then known qualitative evidence about “new singles” is inconclusive.

Questions? Comments?

Thank you!