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# Solo-Living and Social Individualization: Analysis of Life Experience among Young Women in Spain

**Carmen Rodríguez-Guzmán**
University of Jaén, Spain

**Francisco Barros-Rodríguez**
University of Granada, Spain

**Inmaculada Barroso-Benítez**
University of Jaén, Spain

**Antonio David Cámara-Hueso**
University of Jaén, Spain

## Abstract

The increase in one-person households is regarded as a manifestation of the process of social individualization that strengthens individuals' ability to make lifestyle choices to the detriment of certain social institutions. However, the background circumstances to solo living can vary widely and often stem from structural determinants, such as gender inequalities, within the framework of a highly competitive society. This article analyses the nature and social significance of solo-living in Spain through a case study of young adult women (25–45 years of age) residing in an urban environment (Barcelona and Jaen). The analyses focus on aspects connected with the theory of social individualization (e.g. the demands of working life and expectations regarding life partners, motherhood and social relations). Four different profiles of women can be distinguished in the results: 'cosmopolitans', 'unconditionals', 'empowered', and 'temporaries'. In broad terms, the interviewees' narratives bear witness to the process of individualization (self-realization with which to engage in a personal life project), although tensions come into play between personal expectations and the demands of working life, especially in the spheres of sexual partnership and motherhood.

## Keywords

gender, qualitative analysis, social individualization, solo-living, Spain

**Corresponding author:**
Carmen Rodríguez-Guzmán, University of Jaén, 23071 Jaen, Spain.
Email: cguzman@ujaen.es

## Introduction

The rise in one-person households (people who live alone; OPHs hereafter) is a sociodemographic phenomenon that reflects the post-Second World War shift in the structures and value systems of Western societies (Hall et al., 1997; Ogden and Hall, 2000; Roussel, 1983; Wall, 1989). In sociology, it is mainly cast through the lens of the social individualization process, which features the loss of authority of social institutions (such as family) in the configuration of social behaviour and lifestyles (Bauman, 2001; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Lipovetsky, 1983; Sennett, 1992). From this perspective, in an epistemological sense, agency begins to prevail over structure, so that becoming an OPH is one of the stages of the 'biographical pluralism' that people are ever more engaged in as part of the individualization process that characterizes 'reflexive modernity' (Beck, 1996; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Beck et al., 1994; Giddens, 1990). Through this process, which gathered momentum in the second half of the 20th century, biographies and life courses have become more diverse and changeable, thus making solo-living the standard and widespread practice it is today. Following this line of argument, therefore, we can take as an interpretative hypothesis that living alone by choice is the personal affirmation of a way of life: one centred on oneself.

On the other side of the coin, however, to end up living alone simply as a result of circumstances, without it being a matter of preference, may denote that individuals are not so in charge of their own destiny and do not freely plot their basic life course. Depending on the social resources available, solo-living may be a way of life to project personal success and capability (De Paulo, 2006), or a forced transition that could precipitate a situation of vulnerability, given that the costs (and risks) of life are often higher for those who live alone (Bennett and Dixon, 2006). Accordingly, a major criticism of individualization theory is its limited grasp of social complexity (e.g. not accommodating the discourse of people who lack the ability to construct a self-reflective story; Roseneil, 2007). Furthermore, individualization theory has been criticized for interpreting changes led by women as mere adaptation to male patterns (Jamieson et al., 2006). Finally, some works have pointed out its lack of empirical verification: even after observing the changes that individualization theory highlights as causal, there has been remarkable continuity of traditional sociability ties (Duncan and Smith, 2006).

From a socioeconomic and cultural perspective, both the upward trend of solo-living and, seemingly, this underlying process of social individualization have become an overarching reality. Although its growth rate and causes may vary across different societies, its rise can certainly be described as global (Esteve et al., 2020). In Europe, according to the last round of census data (Eurostat, 2011), solo-living is a well-established living arrangement in all countries. In many, especially the central and northern European countries, the percentage of people living alone in 2011 was higher than 15% of the total population. Even in southern European countries, such as Spain, Portugal, and Greece, where solo-living was still relatively rare just two decades earlier (López and Pujadas, 2011), the value was approaching 10% as a result of a marked and sustained increase over that period.

In Spain, the growing tendency to live alone is particularly significant, given that barely 4% of the population was doing so in 1991. The most recent official statistics

show that although the growth in solo dwellers has slowed, the numbers are still on the rise. In 2019, 10.3% of the population lived alone. In household terms, OPHs saw the largest relative growth over recent decades, now representing the second most common household type (25.7% of households), superseded only by nuclear households formed by couples with children (33.4%; INE, 2019a).

Recent research has described the process of generational replacement of these OPHs in Spain, drawing two main conclusions: the diversification of its sociodemographic profile and its selective nature in educational terms (the higher the education level, the more likely one is to live alone, particularly among younger generations; Cámara et al., 2020). It is particularly in our interests to research this segment of the population in which residential solitude is not usually forced due to circumstance (such as the death of a spouse, as is often the case among older population). Its analysis may therefore be more helpful in deciphering the relationship between this living arrangement and the process of social individualization. By way of illustration, the most significant relative OPH increase in Spain has taken place among the young adult population. This is not exclusive to Spain (Chandler et al., 2004; Hall et al., 1997; Jamieson et al., 2009), but it acquires greater significance in a country where the reality of younger generations is governed by two concomitant factors: the high average age of emancipation from the family home and challenging conditions to enter the labour market (Dolado et al., 2013; Verd et al., 2019). Despite this, the percentage of OPHs in the 30–39 age interval tripled in Spain over the period 1991–2019 to its current figure of 10.2% (INE, 2011, 2019a). In short, the progressive 'rejuvenation' of OPHs in Spain has come about in a highly unfavourable socioeconomic context.

We should point out that the segment of young OPH has always been and continues to be a predominantly male domain in Spain. However, the growth in OPHs among the younger generations is higher in relative terms among women. The proportion of women aged 30–34 living alone, for example, quadrupled over the course of one generation (Cámara et al., 2020). There is clear evidence that women joining the workforce is one of the mechanisms that has spurred this process of female emancipation: as women started to have their own income, they were able to consider alternatives to married life. One of the personal implications of this broadening of horizons was the chance to rearticulate family and gender relations and also, therefore, social (and residential) independence. But the gender dimension underlying the rise in young female OPHs in Spain is not only discernible in the magnitude of the trend itself, but also in certain sociodemographic contrasts which merit closer attention. One of the most interesting is that education level (and probably socioeconomic position) is more determinant of solo-living in women than in men (Cámara et al., 2020). This observation fuels the hypothesis that for female OPHs choice and structural determinants are both part of the same reality: an incomplete gender revolution in which women are obliged to participate in a highly competitive professional arena while still assuming traditional roles at certain points in their life cycle (Sandström and Karlsson, 2019). In other words, in societies which are developed but have relatively low levels of equality, it is an obliged – or at least inescapable – choice.

An analysis of the biographical experiences of young women may contribute to existing empirical evidence and shed new light on the social significance of solo-living and its specific gender dimensions. To this aim, this article focusses on discursive analysis of the life course and current social-existential reality of young adult women (aged 25–45)

in Spain. A sample of women living alone in the cities of Barcelona and Jaen is analysed with a view to addressing these research questions: Can their life courses be interpreted within the framework of the social individualization process? What prevails in the strategies they develop: structural determinants or desire-based choice? How do they resolve the conflicts between personal life expectations and the demands of working life? How do they reconcile 'living one's own life' with forging and maintaining social ties?

## Methodology

The qualitative methodology employed in this study was based on in-depth interviews. All participants lived alone and they were selected through informal contact in areas of Barcelona and Jaen where higher concentrations of OPHs were observed in the most recent Population and Housing Census available (INE, 2011). Age and some other usual determinants of solo-living (e.g. marital status, occupation, and educational attainment; Cámara et al., 2020) were the main selection criteria of participants. Some factors that could potentially determine both solo-living status and attitudes towards specific interview topics (e.g. sexual orientation or ethnicity) were not explicitly accounted for during the selection process, which is a limitation.

Two rounds of interviews were conducted (2017 and 2019), resulting in a total of 22 (10 in Barcelona and 12 in Jaen).[1] In Barcelona, women living in both the city centre and the metropolitan area were included to get a broader overview.

Barcelona and Jaen represent two very different urban contexts. Jaen is a small city in the southern region of Andalusia. It is the capital of a province whose economy relies heavily on the agricultural sector and where a large part of the population lives in what could be considered rural or semi-urban municipalities (under 20,000 inhabitants). Traditional community structures (such as family) are firmly entrenched (Camarero, 2010). Barcelona, on the other hand, could be called a 'global city' (Sassen, 2007): highly dynamic in social, cultural, and economic terms. This also applies to employment, especially in comparison to Jaen. According to the Active Population Survey (INE, 2019b), in the fourth quarter of 2019 the unemployment rate for women in Jaen was 25.7%, while in Barcelona, it was 11.2%. For the same period, the female employment rate in Jaen was 32.7%, while in Barcelona, it was up at 50.7%.

While there are many approaches to discourse analysis, this work uses the 'sociological analysis of discourses system' (Conde, 2009). This socio-hermeneutical approach is close to critical discourse analysis (Wodak and Meyer, 2002). Basically, it consists of reconstructing the meaning (i.e. interests) of actors' discourses from the social context of their enunciation (Alonso, 2013: 13). In our case, we reconstruct the meaning of solo-living among young adult women in the cities of Barcelona and Jaen. To do this, we first conduct preliminary analyses of each interview. From these analyses, we then construct a broader analysis of emergent themes relevant to our research question. Certain combinations of themes, or profiles, naturally arise as prevalent. We analysed the discursive positions of these profiles, that is, the narrative configurations behind the texts as well as the semantic spaces of the discourses.

Four different profiles of young adult women living alone emerged (Table 1). We reiterate that these profiles are not a priori ideal types. Rather, they emerge a posteriori

**Table 1.** Dimensions of discursive analysis and resulting profiles.

| The 'cosmopolitans' | The 'unconditionals' |
|---|---|
| 1. University (postgraduate)<br>2. Prestige/middle-high income, stable (except university professor–research fellow), late entry to job market<br>3. Middle–high-class, liberal mentality<br>4. Renting, central area, early-intermediate access to OPH<br>5. Single, no experience of living with partner<br>6. Desirable, not a priority<br>7. Desirable, not a priority<br>8. Job/social life > family<br>9. Circumstantial, would prefer to live with partner<br>10. Barcelona > Jaen<br>**Interviews**<br>*Barcelona*: Alícia (29 years/economist), Mireia (35/Catalan philologist), Laia (37/demographer)<br>*Jaen*: Elena (34/biologist), Sofía (41/economist), Magdalena (41/Hispanic philologist) | 1. Secondary (high school diploma, technical college)<br>2. Prestige/middle-low income, unstable, early entry to job market<br>3. Middle–working class, varied mentalities<br>4. Renting, central area > outskirts, early-intermediate access to OPH<br>5. Single, experience of living with partner<br>6. Not desirable<br>7. Priority<br>8. Social life > job/family<br>9. By choice, *Living Apart Together*<br>10. Barcelona > Jaen<br>**Interviews**<br>*Barcelona*: África (37 years/domestic servant), Carolina (39/receptionist), Laura (43/unemployed beautician)<br>*Jaen*: Rosa (26/sales consultant), Elsa (24/administrator) |
| **The 'empowered'** | **The 'temporaries'** |
| 1. Secondary (technical college), university (degree)<br>2. Prestige/middle–low income, unstable, early entry to job market<br>3. Middle–working class, traditional–conservative mentality<br>4. Homeowner, outskirts, intermediate-late access to OPH<br>5. Single/separated–divorced, experience of living with partner<br>6. Desirable, not a priority<br>7. Desirable, not a priority<br>8. Social life > job/family<br>9. Circumstantial, would prefer to live with partner<br>10. Jaen > Barcelona<br>**Interviews**<br>*Barcelona*: Alba (44 years/sales consultant), Mercè (45/unemployed social worker)<br>*Jaen*: Pilar (37/psychologist), Manuela (40/social worker), María (44/nutritionist) | 1. Secondary (technical college), university (degree)<br>2. Prestige/middle income, stable (or searching), late entry to job market<br>3. Middle-working class, traditional–conservative mentality<br>4. Homeowner (or searching), outskirts, intermediate-late access to OPH<br>5. Single/separated–divorced, experience of living with partner<br>6. High priority<br>7. Priority<br>8. Family > job/social life<br>9. Circumstantial, transitory situation<br>10. Jaen > Barcelona<br>**Interviews**<br>*Barcelona*: Teresa (29 years/shop assistant), Alejandra (31/supply preschool teacher)<br>*Jaen*: Almudena (29/temporary administrator), Victoria (37/, primary school teacher), Cecilia (37/telephone operator), Carmen (45/employment consultant) |

The dimensions of discursive analysis refer to (1) level of studies completed, (2) employment, (3) socioeconomic status (a determination of social class comprises parents' occupation, household living standard, and parental mentalities – mainly regarding the sexual division of labour at home), (4) accommodation/home, (5) marital status, (6) discourse on motherhood, (7) discourse on partner, (8) discourse on current lifestyle, (9) discourse on living alone/being OPH, and (10) presence of profile.
Source: Own data.
OPH: one-person households.

from the aforementioned analytical procedure and happen to relate to specific aspects of the theory of social individualization (e.g. demands of working life, trajectory as an OPH, personal preferences, expectations regarding partners, maternity or social life), all of which are included in the content blocks of the in-depth interview script.

## Results

### *'The cosmopolitans'*

The 'cosmopolitans' profile refers to highly educated professionals who live alone. They hold postgraduate university degrees which have given them the opportunity to study and/or work abroad. They claim to have a successful and satisfactory professional life, but in a highly demanding and competitive arena: 'I've built my life around work, but it's what I find fulfilling' (Sofía). They consider themselves to have good working conditions with a higher than average income and positions of responsibility appropriate to their education level: 'My profession gives me a lot of positive things on a personal level. I've got my weekends for myself, it pays well and it's a job I actually enjoy' (Elena).

The field of professional expectations is where the main difference lies between women living in Barcelona and Jaen: the former are surrounded by a thriving, dynamic market with plenty of jobs on offer, giving them a wider range of options and even a certain degree of territorial mobility. Mireia, for example, declares that 'in all the jobs I've had, I've been the one who decided to leave'. Laia admits: 'I've always been able to jump straight from one job to another'. In Jaen, on the other hand, the chance of finding a job in keeping with their education level is limited to the sphere of public employment:

> After getting my degree I didn't know what to do, I couldn't find work. So I went to Malaga to do a Master's [. . .] While I was waiting for doctoral grants I started studying for public exams. And between one thing and another, I ended up passing and all of a sudden I was a teacher. (Elena)

The cultural reproduction often seen between generations is also part of the 'cosmopolitans' profile; they tend to come from urban middle-class families whose parents have a higher than average education level. This has allowed early emancipation on a professional level, considerable labour mobility, and so on, as well as the chance to establish an OPH at a relatively young age, deciding for themselves on the area and characteristics of their home: 'Most of my friends live with their parents, but I think that having lived in the States [. . .] the most natural path for me was to leave my parents' house and set up on my own' (Alicia).

This profile tends to live in renovated inner city areas that are well connected and culturally and socially diverse, as central districts in big cities are highly attractive to young adults with expectations of social mobility (Bonvalet et al., 2016; López et al., 2019): 'I wanted something more or less central, [. . .] I like it to have shops, gyms and good transport, and it's got a great atmosphere in social terms' (Mireia). For those living in Jaen, cultural needs are also met by travelling to nearby cities, such as Granada or Malaga: 'Jaen is for a relaxed and quiet life, and then at the weekends I go away' (Elena). For these

women, both leisure activities (sport, shopping, theatre or cinema, travelling, etc.) and an active social life (getting together with friends, participating in associations, doing training courses, etc.) form part of the basics in life. Not least of all because they have the spending power to do so. Unlike having children or a stable relationship, these lifestyle elements provide autonomy and do not hinder their careers: 'I like my job. [. . .] My aspirations? To be happy in myself and find a balance between work and leisure. Leisure is really important to me' (Alicia). This is precisely where the main conflict arises: individual liberation (represented in leisure and work) versus family expectations (represented by long-term relationships and children), which in the case of these women is resolved in favour of the former. Personal fulfilment brings penalties and delays life plans.

The 'cosmopolitans' are single but have had various relationships in their lives. Most of them have never lived with their partners, despite having had the opportunity. In fact, they would prefer a stable, lasting relationship in which they can start a family: 'I feel fulfilled in my professional and social life [. . .] but I've always been on the lookout for a stable relationship' (Laia).

The desire to be a mother features heavily in their life projects, although the demands of their professional and social life make them endlessly postpone their plans for motherhood: 'I'm 37 years old, I've still got a little leeway but . . . it's ever more pressing' (Laia). The discourse on expectations of having children is marked by age. The youngest prioritize work (and leisure), while children are a medium-term priority: 'I'm 34, I've still got time' (Elena)'. As they get older there is greater concern: 'the biological clock is ticking' (Magdalena). Alternative strategies are considered. Mireia is thinking about egg-freezing and continuing to wait for the right moment: 'I would like to have kids one day. My problem is that my biological age doesn't match my social and emotional age'.

In short, the 'cosmopolitans' do not reject long-term relationships or motherhood. However, the demands of this lifestyle usually cause them to postpone attainment of these goals.

### *'The unconditionals'*

These are women who live alone by choice. Their level of education is medium and/or oriented to early entry into the labour market (e.g. high school diploma, technical college). They come from middle or working-class families, and started their working lives young, mainly in the private sector and in relatively unstable job conditions: 'I finished high school and I didn't know what I wanted to study. I couldn't find anything that made me say "Ah, this is what I want". So I just started working' (Carolina).

Some have now achieved greater job stability, although a common feature of 'unconditionals' is a medium to low income: 'I just want to be my own person, have my independence and the peace of mind of not having to call my mother to say "give me money"' (Rosa). For this reason, being able to find work quickly (the employment context) is essential. Laura, currently unemployed, is unconcerned. Carolina boasts that she has left jobs and had no problems finding another: 'I always found it really easy to change jobs. I've left three jobs [laughs]'. This is less feasible in Jaen, with its depressed job market and limited work opportunities.

For the 'unconditionals', work is not a means of personal fulfilment but rather of retaining independence and surviving on your own: 'I've been living an unstable life here [in Barcelona] for fifteen years, but I value other things [. . .] My personal relationships are more important to me than work' (Africa). Personal fulfilment (such as working hours that allow one to lead an active social life or satisfy educational, artistic and cultural needs) ranks higher in importance than a professional career. The ideal, however, would be to find a job that, as well as meeting these needs, allowed them to grow as a person:

> In my last job I got bored of always doing the same thing and I told them I was leaving [. . .] Until I started at the hospital, which is what I want to do for a living, I've always changed jobs frequently. (Carolina)

The ideal relationship style for this profile is defined by the concept of 'living apart together' (LAT), especially for the 'unconditionals' of Barcelona. In Jaen, a greater preference was noted for conventional couple and family relationships (except among the youngest generations). LAT means having a stable, committed partnership, but without sharing a home: 'The living with the boyfriend part . . . that's where my problem lies. He knows that part of me needs to be alone and he understands that [. . .] I really enjoy my solitude' (Rosa). LAT couples can retain the freedom they crave without the need to share their space and time every day, and act independently when deciding what to do or not to do: 'My partner is the one that said "we'll be fine as long as we live apart". [. . .] We're great, we've been in love for six years now' (Africa). Carolina argues that LAT keeps the relationship fresh, improving the quality of the time they spend together:

> People are going to realise that they need to live alone in their own houses and be a couple. That's what I'd like to see [. . .] Why should I share my personal space? Where's my freedom? [. . .] That 'other half' thing, no way! I'm a whole person and you are too.

While Africa, Rosa, and Elsa are already in LAT relationships, Carolina and Laura aspire to them.

Moreover, LAT suits people who have no desire to start a family, as is the case here. They all fiercely defend their opinion: 'I've got friends who are like sisters to me. They've got kids now, so I'm like the auntie [. . .] However, I really don't like them [children]. I'm absolutely sure I don't want them' (Africa). Motherhood would lead to lifestyle changes they are not willing to accept: 'I go into a panic when I think about having kids, it's like breaking with your life completely' (Rosa). Laura actually turns the discourse on its head, arguing that it is women who want to be mothers who should justify why they want children: 'I don't like this world, the way it works. The last thing I want to do is bring the most important little person of my life into a world like this'.

### *'The empowered'*

The women in this profile have gone through transformations into less conventional lifestyles. The 'empowered' opted at a young age to train in a specific profession and enter the job market, especially the private sector, as soon as possible: 'I got really good marks, but I said "I'm going to technical college because then I can start earning sooner

and help out at home" [. . .] I completed the two years and started work at a tax consultants' (Alba). The differences between the two contexts analysed are clear in their employment histories, more wrought with difficulties in Jaen due to greater instability and uncertainty, making it harder to maintain OPH status. María, after a long spell working for private companies, is currently employed as a substitute in the Andalusian public health service:

> I'd do the holiday campaigns at least, so Christmas, summer . . . I'd work for as long as they lasted [. . .] Until I finally got the contract I have now, a year ago [. . .] I've only got a small salary but I can afford to live on my own.

The change in the direction of their life course tends to be sparked by an episode that culminates in a personal crisis. From this moment onwards, they resolve to leave behind the unsatisfying life they have been playing out according to the traditional and conventional rules imposed by their modest family origins (middle-working-class home, clearly defined gender roles, living in working-class neighbourhood or rural location): 'Why did we get married? Out of habit, because everyone got married. And because of our parents' (Alba). Manuela, having played the traditional housewife role for years, decided the moment had come to break away from a life built around her husband:

> I got up one morning and sat down on the sofa with my dogs. I looked at them, looked at myself, looked around at the house, and said: 'What am I doing with my life? I'm worth more than this' [. . .] I told him [husband] 'I'm going to start studying again'. And he said 'no', 'cos 'who was going to be there put hot food on the table at lunchtime?' [. . .] I said 'I can't take this anymore' [. . .] I'd been wanting to do it for years but I wasn't brave enough. (Manuela)

These women have been through a process of empowerment through which they have recovered their self-confidence and, by extension, taken back control of their lives. Age plays an important part in this process: in addition to providing a certain perspective on life, one is more prone to undergoing some kind of transformative personal crisis: 'After my divorce I cried and cried. Because I really wasn't used to living on my own [. . .] Now it feels good to get home and not have to explain myself to anyone' (Manuela). One of the characteristics of the 'empowered', therefore, is that they belong to an older age group (around 40 years old) than the rest of the profiles.

The 'empowered' have experienced living with partners in stable relationships, but these have not prospered. Despite this, they remain open to the possibility: 'I've always wanted a partner to live with. But it's not happening [. . .] Supposedly I'm still looking but I can't be doing it very well [laughs] [. . .] Although I do recognise that I've become very picky' (Mercè). The key point is that although the idea of a relationship is attractive, it is by no means indispensable. They would only be willing to reconsider their choice to live alone if they found a person that met certain criteria:

> I'd like to find someone, I've never been closed off to that [. . .] If I were to find a man who more or less fit the bill . . . a normal, straightforward man, a nice person, who I can have a conversation with. If not, I'd rather be on my own. (María)

The original idea of having children starts to fade over time, especially when they are approaching an age at which it becomes less likely: 'The maternal instinct took hold when it wasn't going well with my partner. I felt ready to have kids, but he wasn't the right person. And, well, time moves on and now, at my age . . .' (Alba). The 'empowered' aspire to motherhood, but only within the traditional family *continuum*: having a long-term partner with whom they can get married and, later on, have children. When this linearity is interrupted, plans to have children move into a secondary plane and are postponed *ad infinitum*: 'A single mum definitely not, because I didn't want to have a boy and for him to be lonely, with no dad' (Alba). Having children is only contemplated in the case of having a long-term relationship (soon): 'I think I'll meet someone [a partner] [. . .] I might end up having children if the other person also wants to' (María). One alternative would be a relationship with someone who already has children: 'It's more important to me to find a partner than a child [. . .] I can see myself with a partner who's already got a kid [laughs]. I wouldn't mind if they came as a package deal' (Mercè). In terms of free time, the process of empowerment they have lived through has helped them to boost their network of friendships and take part in leisure activities of various kinds: travelling with friends, going to dance classes, organizing film festivals, and so on.

In summary, the 'empowered' profile does not deliver a groundbreaking narrative in which solo-living is the ultimate goal. Their expectations revolve around finding a stable relationship, but one which still allows them to retain a certain level of independence and grow freely as a person. Their main resolve is to never go back to the traditional setup of their past: 'I've been with [married to] a person who brought me nothing but headaches and suffering. I'd rather be alone than suffer' (Manuela).

### *'The temporaries'*

The final profile, the 'temporaries', is made up of women who think of their solo-living status as transitory: they express a wish to stop living alone. Their education level is similar to the 'empowered': technical college qualifications and/or university degrees.

Their work expectations do not generally revolve around having a successful professional career: 'I could go for promotion, but really at the moment I'm just fine where I am' (Carmen). Her priority is a job that will give her stable employment and guarantee a steady income:

> You don't have to sit the [public] competitive exams. Here [in Catalonia] you can finish your degree and register on the supply teacher jobs board [. . .] I know I'll always have work. So it's also an option to just carry on as a substitute. (Alejandra)

Most of them have their sights set on the public sector, whether they already have public sector jobs or are still sitting competitive exams to get in:

> I passed my exams to be a primary teacher and, what do you know, I went from being a bit rocky financially speaking to saying 'you're a public sector employee now, you're sorted for life'. My brother use to call it the Nescafé[2] wage, and it's true! (Victoria)

For these women, romance and family are very important. Their traditional outlook, influenced by their family environment (middle–working class and conservative mentality), is one in which getting married, having children and buying a property are top priorities in life: 'The competitive exams thing has affected me because I felt I had to hurry to get a job, get married, have kids . . . all at once' (Almudena). Likewise, family plays a central role in their daily life. Interaction with other family members, such as siblings or parents, is frequent. Although they have a considerable social network in and around their neighbourhood and workplace, their free time tends to be more dedicated to family.

The 'temporaries' prefer to live in close vicinity to family members, especially parents: 'I've lived in my neighbourhood [L'Hospitalet de Llobregat, Barcelona] all my life, ten minutes away from my mum's [. . .] I quite often pop in at "home", well, my mum's house, which is on the street just round the back' (Teresa). The supportive relationship between parents and children is usually two-way. The former provide financial and/or emotional support in times of need and the latter see to matters, such as their parents' health and personal care:

> I chose this area because I'm in walking distance from my parents. It's normal, they're getting older by the day. I'm very devoted to their needs [. . .] My parents are always there for me whenever they notice something's getting me down. (Carmen)

Their decision to live alone has come about by chance: 'Circumstances led me to live alone. We bought a flat as a couple, but we broke up. So I bought his share and took on the whole mortgage' (Cecilia). Their wish is to live with a partner but in the absence of this they choose to be OPHs instead. Teresa, for example, struggles to make ends meet in order to continue living alone:

> I left home to live with my boyfriend. We lived together for a few months and then broke up. So I stayed on in the flat on my own [. . .] The main drawback is covering all the expenses involved in living alone off only one salary.

Their outlook on coupling is traditional, as they all aspire to sharing their daily life and starting a family: 'I don't feel lonely, but if I were to tell you "I don't miss having someone by my side", I'd be lying [. . .] A steady partner to share my day-to-day with, that's my main aim in life' says Carmen, who has never lived with a partner. Even those that have, including some who have suffered traumatic experiences in previous relationships, do not rule out future cohabitation. Nevertheless, another feature they have in common is 'having grown accustomed to this being alone thing' (Almudena). Although 'there are moments when I'm glad to be on my own, but I'm the kind of person who needs to have somebody [. . .] I long for the day I can live with a partner' (Teresa).

With regard to children, the 'temporaries' want to be mothers but within a steady relationship. The alternative of forming a single parent family clashes with their more traditional discourse in which children do not feature in the absence of a spouse. Despite this, and unlike the 'empowered', their strong desire to be mothers tends to win over: 'If things went well and we lived together in the future, yes. I want to be a mother [. . .] I've

planned out that, if things don't work out with this guy, I'll be a single mum' (Teresa). They all see themselves as mothers in the short term: 'If I had a partner I'd consider having a kid now. But it's also something I've thought about doing on my own' (Cecilia). In the end, understandably, age presses them to stop prolonging the decision and take the plunge into single motherhood.

Their expectations of motherhood are so high that certain obstacles, which may put other women off the idea of being a mother, affect the 'temporaries' less deeply. Teresa has decided to have children despite her currently precarious employment situation. Carmen, even in her distinctly conservative social and family circles, is encouraged by both her parents and other close contacts to become a single mother:

> I can't quite make my mind up [about being a single mother], I think that a kid should have a father [. . .] But I'm not sure, because I really love children. Even my parents encourage me [. . .] Sometimes you get carried away and I think I've made my mind up. I'm looking into going it alone.

And Victoria, in the event of not being able to have her own children, would consider adopting:

> I'm in a relationship that I'm happy in, now [. . .] If it works out I'd think about having kids with him, because the ideal would be for them to have a mother and a father living in the same house. If it doesn't work out, well I'll have to consider insemination. Or if I can't, then there's adopting [. . .] Having kids is something I've always had crystal clear.

## Conclusion

This study has provided qualitative evidence on one of the most commonly acknowledged consequences of the process of social individualization: the rise in OPHs. We aimed to explore the social significance of solo-living in young adult women in two urban contexts in Spain. This population segment, which a priori lives alone by choice, has had to navigate the obstacles of an increasingly segmented job market. At the same time, they have also encountered (gendered) dimensions of social structure, such as expectations around motherhood. We therefore believe that their discourse is highly pertinent in establishing whether structural determinants or desire-based choices prevail in their lives. In this regard, the four profiles established add layers of nuance and specificity that lend greater complexity to the original question of whether living alone is by choice or imposition. Both the optimistic version of the theory of individualization (e.g. Giddens) and the pessimistic (e.g. Bauman) emphasize the prevalence of agency (Jamieson et al., 2006: 2). Yet the empirical evidence provided in this work shows that there is a tension between women's desires for autonomy/self-actualization (linked to living alone) and the way their lives and choices are shaped by the abovementioned structural factors.

The women interviewed, who were classified as 'cosmopolitans', 'unconditionals', 'empowered'' or 'temporaries', exemplify the tensions that they construct their lives on. There is no obstacle to seeing that the process of individualization, in terms of self-realization to follow one's own life project (Bauman, 2001; Beck, 1992; Beck and

Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1992), is a recurring theme and common denominator in our interviewees' narratives. The autonomy that employment brings, having one's own space, and the reconfiguration of traditional social ties around family, couples and motherhood, correspond to the type of subject who lives by (and also suffers from) their own decisions. This phenomenon transcends the hypothesis we might call *pure agency* to also reflect certain emerging structural factors that gain specificity within the dynamics of Spanish society in recent decades: accelerated social change and the consequent generational replacement of OPHs (Cámara et al., 2020). The profiles found are good illustrations of this.

The 'cosmopolitans', dedicated to their demanding careers, have better professional opportunities open to them (more so in Barcelona than in Jaen, where taking competitive exams for the public sector is practically the only way to access highly qualified jobs (Gálvez et al., 2011). The hedonistic and individualistic component is very much present, as a means by which to 'be happy in myself'. However, these women also display the most contradictions in their OPH narratives: they want to have a partner (Poortman and Liefbroer, 2010) (in fact, most of them do have one) and even children, but they also want a peaceful life and their 'own space'. Their personal and professional trajectories are not conducive to stable partnership or building a family.

The 'unconditionals' see work as a way to remain independent rather than a means of personal fulfilment. This is reflected in their preference for relationships in which personal space is maintained (*living apart together*; Roseneil, 2006) and in their express wish not to have children (Cea, 2007). Just as with the 'cosmopolitans', keeping hold of their own space becomes a key element in their lives: this is how their yearning for another grows, but with no space for that other. However, this independence cannot be identified with isolation, as they also claim an active social life to be a pillar of their lives.

The 'empowered' have lived through a process of empowerment (hence the name) through which they have regained their self-confidence, which in turn has allowed them to take back control of their lives. Despite defending the benefits of solo-living, they still hold on to their original desire for a long-term relationship that may lead to children. However, their life journey has made this dream ever more unreachable.

Finally, the 'temporaries', found more in Jaen, make a virtue out of necessity: they are OPHs because their expectations of a traditional family have not been fulfilled (yet, perhaps) (Gross, 2005). Their residential status could be described as transitory, and they do not wish not to live alone any longer. For these women, personal and family life is very important: they hold on to traditional views on family based on following the sequence of 'getting married and then having children'.

Of course, transitions between these profiles cannot be ruled out. Nor can transience and dynamism in a large part of the states and attitudes described. Actually, the results invite us to talk about dynamic trajectories which could make, for instance, 'cosmopolitans' become convinced of the benefits of LAT or 'unconditional' want to have children. However, the fact that an individual's attitudes and profile may change does not imply that the contrasts between the profiles should be overlooked.

Such contrasts have partly to do with family origins, which are immutable. The 'unconditional' have worked in medium-skilled jobs and they come from families with relatively lower living standards. Perhaps, that is why they focus on their independence

and state very explicitly that they do not want to have children. They also clearly favour forms of relationship that preserve their space (e.g. living apart together). Their 'cosmopolitan' peers, more reliant on familial support, are less explicitly against motherhood -perhaps because their upbringing leads them to believe family and professional life can be made compatible, even if this requires waiting until they find the proper conditions. Clearly, there are complex relations between social class and attitudes towards the family based on (1) the material and symbolic support provided by parents and (2) parental educational and occupational characteristics. These factors holistically influence daughters' decisions (e.g. parents' educational/cultural level may influence daughters' possibilities to devote more time to academic/professional training).

We also have to consider the socioeconomic context. Clearly, Barcelona, a city full of job opportunities, suits the 'unconditional'. Jaen, a smaller and less economically dynamic city, will naturally match with the 'temporaries' -committed to a more traditional life and for whom solo-living is as a transitory state-.

All four profiles enjoy a decent education level, an active work life, emotional freedom, and financial independence. In other words, they want to 'live for themselves' (Beck, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Murillo, 2006), especially when the social conditions make it feasible to do so. However, reconciling expectations of personal freedom with professional demands is not easy. These contradictions come into even sharper focus when coupling and raising children (López, 2011). As a whole, the longing for a long-term relationship grows stronger with age. Women with more life and relationship experience accept that sexual partners tend to be ephemeral, but believe that children are for life (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). With the exception of the 'unconditionals', motherhood is a defining feature of femininity (Santiago, 2015).

This *hunger for a full life* (Beck, 1992) highlights desires that are difficult to reconcile: private space invaded by another, time consumed by child care or the chance of a promotion hindered by family commitments. How do these women resolve such tensions? The 'unconditionals' in particular favour LAT, which they see as a way to get around the problem of wanting a partner but not wanting their space invaded. Similarly, the use of reproductive technology is not ruled out in order to buy more time in a life in which 'my biological age doesn't match my social age'. However, there are few solutions to be found for time given over to work, except in the case of some of the 'empowered': they leave their job in search of one that brings them greater fulfilment. The show of autonomy is great among these women who, even when they fall ill, manage to get by on their own.

As Beck (1992) asserts, is it these constructions of autonomy that turn into the iron bars of solitude? Our study cannot confirm this, as the women interviewed are not *singles* without meaningful family relationships and lacking in ties that are unbreakable and permanently binding (Bauman, 2003). So how is living their own life reconciled with the maintenance of social ties? By protecting their independence. In romantic relationships, this stance ends up corroding traditional relationships in favour of greater equality, curtailing the privileges traditionally enjoyed by men: less time dedicated to housework and the personal care of others (Beck, 1992). As women take on more family commitments, getting some time to themselves, which was previously considered indispensable, becomes increasingly difficult to achieve (Carrasquer et al., 2015).

Regardless of profile, a salient feature of our interviews was the positive outlook proffered on solo-living. We therefore find no record of the discourse of the wretched in the terms set out by Rosenmayr and Kolland (1999), whose life in solitude brings them no satisfaction whatsoever. In this regard, not even the 'temporaries', who no longer want to be OPHs, experience solitude in an unhappy way. Given that women have made unstable conquests that constantly require defending and offer insecure positions (Beck, 1992), the rise in OPHs among these women means that the life project they define for themselves appears to have a condition of possibility: solitude. We could say that the 'choice' of living alone (present in the discourse) is ultimately explained by the need or 'imposition' to develop oneself in a society with persistent gender inequalities (Jamieson, 1999). The positive contribution to their biographies that 'living for themselves' represents ceases to be practicable once they start a family. Thereafter, their desires shift from personal goals and aspirations to prioritizing the family. Thus, in our view, the key to interpreting the social significance of the OPH for these women lies in gender relations: the change in the traditional allocation of roles and the possibilities of living in equality with their male counterparts.

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## ORCID iD

Francisco Barros-Rodríguez https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3528-0511

## Notes

1. Interviews were held face-to-face in locations chosen by the interviewees and they were audio recorded. They partake of a larger research on solo-living in which 80 in-depth interviews were conducted in Barcelona and Jaen. All interviews were carried out with the previous written or recorded informed consent of the interviewees. We guaranteed the protection of privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity, among other ethical considerations.
2. The expression refers to a promotional campaign in which this instant coffee brand offered customers the chance to win a lifelong monthly wage (currently 2000 euros) in a prize draw.

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## Author biographies

Carmen Rodríguez-Guzmán has been Associate Professor at Universidad de Jaén (Spain) since 1996. She was awarded her PhD in Sociology by the Universidad Complutense de Madrid (Spain) in 2011 and she received the Jaén Economic and Social Council Award for the best doctoral research for her work on the Santana Motor manufacturing plant. She is a member of the research group 'Social challenges in complex societies' (PAIDI SEJ-311). Her research focuses on the sociology of work, economic sociology, sociology of industrial relations and gender studies.

Francisco Barros-Rodríguez is Assistant Professor of Sociology at Universidad de Granada (Spain). He is a member of the research group 'Social Problems in Andalusia' (PAIDI SEJ-129). He has a PhD in Social Sciences (Universidad de Granada, 2017; FPU scholarship from the Spanish Ministry of Education). He is Visiting Researcher at the International Migration Institute (University of Oxford, United Kingdom) and the Migration and Employment Research Centre (Trinity College Dublin, Ireland). His fields of expertise are migration, labour market and industrial relocation.

Inmaculada Barroso-Benítez has been Associate Professor of Sociology at Universidad de Jaén (Spain) since 1996. She has a PhD in Sociology (Universidad de Granada, 2003). She is a member of the research group 'Social challenges in complex societies' (PAIDI SEJ-311) and heads the research project. 'Profiles, environments and identities of forthcoming sociability. Geosociology of one-person households in Spain'. Her fields of expertise are social inequalities, population dynamics, new forms of cohabitation and processes of social exclusion and social deviation.

Antonio David Cámara-Hueso has been Associate Professor of Sociology at Universidad de Jaén (Spain) since 2015 and Director of the research group 'Social challenges in complex societies' (PAIDI SEJ-311) since 2021. He has a PhD in Modern-Contemporary History (Universidad de Granada, 2007) and MA in Methods and Techniques for the study of the Population (Centre d'Estudis Demogràfics at Universitat Autónoma de Barcelona, 2006). His fields of expertise are demography and population sociology.

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