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Sociodemographic analysis of an accelerated transition: the rise of solo living in Spain

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ABSTRACT


The rise in one-person households is one of the most significant sociodemographic phenomena Western societies have undergone since the mid-twentieth century. It is a phenomenon of particular interest in societies where family has traditionally held an important role in determining living arrangements. In Spain, only 4.1% of the population lived alone in 1991 while currently such percentage is more than 10% and approximately one in four homes are one-person households. This study analyses the process of generational replacement of these households taking into consideration four sociodemographic variables: age, sex, marital status and level of education. The influence of these variables, together with labour status, on solo-living is examined between 1991 and 2011 by applying demographic analysis and multivariate logistic regression models to census microdata samples from the Spanish National Institute of Statistics. Results show an inter-generational increase in solo living, affecting all age groups, as well as a diversification of the demographic profile of solo dwellers in Spain over the last three decades. This trend did not interrupt during the economic recession although being employed increased the probability of living alone invariably. Other factors contributing to a higher probability of living alone were being man and having higher education level (particularly among women). We find notable changes in the sociological profile of these households: an increase in the relative weight of young solo-dwellers and a drop in the weight of widowhood in favour of singlehood. These results are discussed in the context of the social changes that Spain has undergone

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KEYWORDS Solo living; one-person households; second demographic transition; generational replacement; demographic analysis; Spain

Introduction

The increase in one-person households (OPHs hereafter) is one of the most significant sociodemographic changes of the last few decades.

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Although the phenomenon initially attracted the attention of researchers in relation to developed Western societies, recent evidence points to it becoming progressively more universal (United Nations 2017). Moreover, with varying intensity and different underlying factors, the rise in OPHs is thought to be a cross-cutting process in cultural and socioeconomic terms (Esteve *et al.* 2020; Park 1994; Yeung and Cheung 2015; Dommaraju 2015; Raymo 2015).

In this global rise of solo living, the strong influence of Western socio-cultural patterns, which lie at the root of the phenomenon, cannot go unnoticed (Lesthaeghe and Surkyn 2007). Broadly speaking, the increase in solo living can be understood within the general framework of sociodemographic change that the most highly developed Western societies underwent over the second half of the twentieth century. This change was reflected, among other aspects, in the gradual reduction in household size (process of nuclearization) and in the parallel process of the atomization of households. Both processes are related to underlying factors in Western societies' transition to postmodernity (Chandler *et al.* 2004; Jamieson *et al.* 2009; Klinenberg 2013), which is perhaps best summarized in relation to the backdrop to this study by the concept of the *Second Demographic Transition*.

This concept mainly refers to a diversification in living arrangements and a reconfiguration of the main transitions between events in the life cycle (e.g. later marriage and parenthood, drop in fertility, increase in extramarital cohabitation, increase in separation and divorce rates, increase in single parenthood, etc.; Lesthaeghe 1983, 1995; van de Kaa 1987; see Castro-Martin and Seiz-Puyuelo 2014 on Spain).

With marked differences between countries in tempo and intensity, solo living in Europe moved into view over the final decades of the twentieth century (Kaufman 1994) and has taken hold as a trend over the first decades of this century. A comparison based on the latest round of national censuses carried out in 2011 (Eurostat online) informs us of the contrasts that existed at the time in the prevalence of OPHs. Percentages for the Northern European countries were close to 20% of the total population and systematically higher than 35% of all households. At the other end of the scale were several Mediterranean countries and others that, while not belonging to that area, share two important characteristics with the former: (1) significantly lower levels of social provision than Northern European states (Esping-Andersen 1990; Sarasa and Moreno 1995), and (2) the significantly greater stronghold on society of Catholic culture and the social institution of family than in the aforementioned

states (Kertzer and Barbagli 2003). In this group of countries, which includes Spain, the percentages are systematically below 10% and 25% respectively.

In the European context, the rise in solo living is of particular interest in countries such as Spain, where the institution of family has historically played a highly influential role in articulating social relations in general and living arrangements in particular (Del Campo and Rodríguez-Brioso 2002; Meil 2015), including the process of leaving from parental home (Holdsworth 2005). Illustratively, in 2002, thus close to the midterm of the period that is covered in our work, national Labour Force Surveys reported that more than 20% of Spanish women and more than 30% of men remained at parental home, similarly to the cases of Italy, Greece and Portugal (Fokkema and Liefbroer 2008). These figures vividly compares with some other European countries where such percentages were noticeably lower (1.7% in the Netherlands, 4.6% in France, 10.1% in Austria for women, and 5.6%, 9.2% and 23.9% for men, respectively).

A glance at the censuses figures is enough to give us an impression of the magnitude of the sociodemographic change that Spain has gone through. The percentage of population living alone more than doubled from 1991 (4.1%) to 2011 (9%). This means that in the space of two decades OPHs have undergone a relative increase of more than 100%.¹ In neighbouring France, a country with average figures for Western Europe in terms of prevalence and tendency, OPHs increased by 88% in 25 years (1975–2000; Ogden and Hall 2004). In Great Britain, the proportion of people living alone took three decades to double (from 9% in 1973 to 17% in 2004; Roseneil 2006). Comparing Spain with these two central referents of the early process of European modernization helps us to understand the sudden social change that the country has experienced in the last few decades.

The latest available data, which comes from the National Household Survey, indicate that the process of the atomization of households continues in Spain. The percentage of the Spanish population living alone in 2018 was somewhat higher than 10%. Of the total number of households in Spain, the relative weight of OPHs has grown from 13.3% in 1991 to 25.5% in 2018 (INEbase online) (Figure 1).

Previous works focused on Spain coped with the main features of the phenomenon in demographic and/or geographic terms under a cross-

¹Note that the percentage of OPHs in 1991 in Spain was only slightly higher than that of India in 2011, which is one of most traditional Asian countries with the strongest patriarchal family structures (Dommaraju 2015).

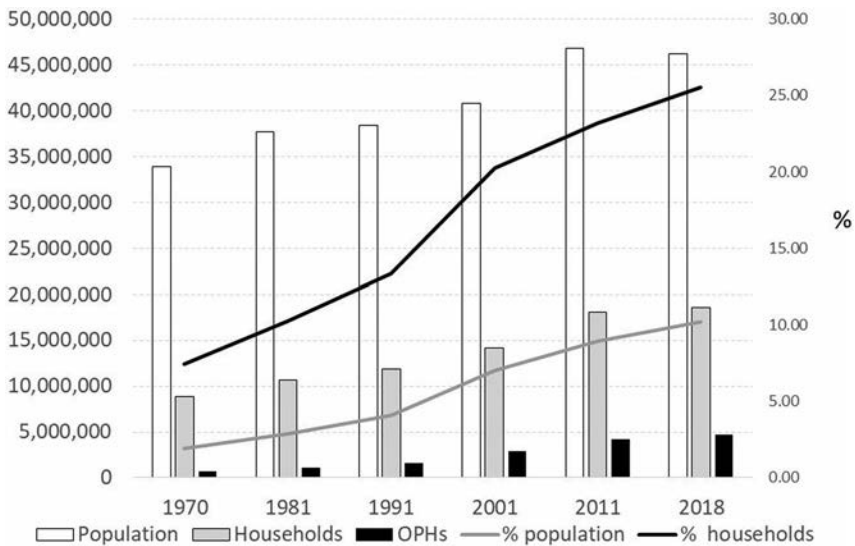


Figure 1. Evolution of OPHs as a percentage of the total population and the total number of households. Spain, 1970–2018. Source: INEbase (INE, online) except for 1981 Del Campo and Rodríguez-Brioso (2002).

sectional perspective (López-Villanueva and Pujadas 2011). Also, a number of studies focused on specific segments of the Spanish population in terms of living arrangements which directly or indirectly referred to OPHs (e.g. Fokkema and Liefbroer 2008 with Spain among fifteen more European countries; Vitali 2010; López-Villanueva and Pujadas 2018). The present study undertakes a combination of cross-sectional analysis and quasi-cohort analysis, with a view to integrating the factors of change in demographic structure with the factors of social change involved in the generational replacement of solo living. It does so for the whole of the Spanish adult population (ages 18+). This allows observing cohort trends and changes in the sociodemographic composition of OPHs as well as some of their specificities with respect to the whole population. Multivariable logistic regression models are used aiming at disentangling the influence of each of the variables involved in the analyses in explaining the probability of living alone between 1991 and 2011.

Materials and methods

The analyses in this study are based on census microdata samples (1991, 2001 and 2011) provided by the Spanish National Institute of Statistics

(INE). These samples (we selected the population aged 18+) correspond to 1% (1991; $N=292,678$) 5% (2001; $N=1,663,272$) and 9% (2011; $N=3,411,801$) of the census.² Descriptive analyses (trends and socio-demographic patterns) were conducted on weighed data whereas multivariate logistic regression models were run on unweighted data.

Although there are more recent sociodemographic data available in the Spanish statistics system, we chose to limit the analysis to the above time period because the three censuses were evenly spaced across time and the variables studied were easily harmonized. Moreover, their even spacing permitted an accurate follow-up of five-year cohort groups at ten-year intervals.

The methods employed are widely used in demographic analysis. We calculated general proportions and specific proportions of OPHs by sex, age and generation, and by two additional sociodemographic variables: marital status and education level. Marital status offers a window onto the diversification of living arrangements and transitions between household types that are characteristic of the Second Demographic Transition. Level of education sheds light on the process of socioeconomic change and the composition of human capital in a society. Furthermore, we must take into account the relationship between official level of education and socioeconomic status, particularly among older generations and in cases like Spain, where the process of democratization in access to the education system came about relatively late (Pérez-Díaz 1999; Torres-Albero 2015). Both variables, as we shall see in the results, are also highly useful indicators of changes in gender relations.

For analysis by marital status, the categories of *separated* and *divorced* were combined. For education level, two groups were created: *primary education or lower*, and *secondary education or higher*. The reason for this grouping is that harmonizing the census categories with the four standard levels for educational attainment set out by the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED – *less than primary*, *primary*, *secondary* and *tertiary*) gave rise to certain irregularities in the results due to the different encoding of this variable in the three censuses analysed. In other words, constant changes in the Spanish education system meant that assigning a set of studies to one or another of the four

²The smaller size of the sample in 1991 is due to the absence of a variable reporting on the type/size of the household within the individual questionnaires. Thus, we used the household questionnaire of the census whose size is smaller. It contains a representative sample of households at a national level which includes the sociodemographic characteristics of all members of each household as well as the variables needed to discern between OPHs and other type of household.

ISCED categories was often wrought with ambiguity, therefore merging them into these two groups largely helped to solve this problem. Notwithstanding, in the second set of analyses based on multivariate logistic regression models, we also report on the results obtained when using the four categories. Importantly, the direction of the effects observed remained unchanged whether two or four categories were used: as a rule, the higher educational attainment, the higher probability of living alone.

The principles applied to interpreting the analyses are also very simple. On one hand, we can follow the trajectory of a determined group of generations (birth cohorts) across time (and thus between different ages). On the other, we can compare various groups of generations at the same age. These set of descriptive analyses take in the adult population (18+) and five-year age groups are used (except the 18–24 group which covers six years). The range of ages in the generational analyses is restricted to 30–74 in order to better capture the intergenerational change in solo living that is potentially related to attitudinal and/or cultural values. On one hand, the youngest generation group analysed (1977–81) experienced a notable delay in leaving parental home (and thus in the potential formation of OPHs; Gil-Calvo 2002; Requena 2002; Moreno 2012; Comas-Arnau 2015) in comparison with precedent cohort groups. This mainly affect to young people in their twenties and it is largely associated with a greater need for further education due to an increase in competitiveness in the context of professionalization (López-Blasco *et al.* 2003) and with the difficult conditions encountered by young people in Spain when trying to enter the job market (Bendit *et al.* 2009; Becker *et al.* 2010; Fundación Novia Salcedo 2013; Dolado *et al.* 2013; OECD 2019; Verd *et al.* 2019). On the other, the oldest generations analysed (1917–21) reached 1991 at 70–74 years of age. Setting this age group as the upper limit of these analyses mitigates to a good extent the possible effects of mortality on the prevalence of solo living as well as the potential effect related to change of residence from household to institution due to loss of functional autonomy across successive cohort groups at a given age. In Spain, both factors become more relevant from 75 years onward, considering the evolution of life expectancy and disability over the period analysed.³

³Life expectancy at birth in this country was 77.06 years in 1991 and it increased to 79.67 in 2001 and 82.25 in 2011 (INE online b). This means that survivorship up to 75 years of age was already spread at the beginning of the period under study but not so survivorship at higher ages. Actually life expectancy at age 75 increased dramatically in relative terms from 1991 (10.53 years) to 2001 (11.58 years) and 2011 (12.88 years) (INE online b). In words, the upper limit of the oldest age group taken for the comparison of cohort groups (age 74) is never lower than life expectancy at birth over the time scope that is

As for multivariate logistic regression analyses, these are conducted through the most used approach, that is, establishing one reference category for each covariate. In the main these analyses only differ from the descriptive ones in that we examined the whole range of adult ages and in that we add a relevant potential determinant of solo living as it is labour status. To this regard, it must be noted that unemployment rate largely fluctuated in Spain over the period analysed which might have influenced the actual possibility of living alone. The unemployment rate (annual average) as estimated by the INE ([online c](#)) was 16.3% in 1991, 10.5% in 2001 and 21.39% in 2011. Interviewees' labour status always reported on employed/unemployed situations but this variable differed on the rest of categories across censuses so that the categories used in these analyses are the result of the only harmonization doable.

The following model specifications were carried out:

- (a) Assessing the trend in the proportion of OPHs in Spain, for which census years were introduced as dummy variables. Technically, as age groups are included in the model as control variables, this approach informs on the generational change in the proportion of OPHs. That is to say, once changes in the age structure of the population as well as in other covariates are controlled for, significant variations in the odds ratios over time can be indirectly interpreted as a generational trend.
- (b) Assessing the ability of the covariates in explaining the odd of living alone over time, for which we replicated the same model with census data of 1991, 2001 and 2011 separately.
- (c) Assessing the ability of the covariates in explaining the odd of living alone for men and women separately.

Model specifications *a* and *b* were tested with and without three interactions between pairs of variables that refer to gender/marital status, gender/labour status and gender/age. Importantly, both the values and the statistical significance of the coefficients for the main covariates remained virtually the same while a good number of interactions resulted significant too. The results displayed correspond to the models that included the interactions. The interpretation of the results from these

dealt with in this work. Regarding the autonomy to perform daily life activities and thus the probability of living at an institution, previous studies displayed that, in general, disability among diverse cohort groups examined increased very moderately between ages 65 and 75 and that such increase is much more noticeable from then on (Cámara *et al.* 2015).

models rests on the odds ratios – column $Exp(B)$ – which display the relative increase or decrease in the odd of living alone with respect to the reference category of a given variable, once the rest of covariates included in the model are controlled for. Values higher than 1, indicate a relative increase in such odd and vice-versa.

Results

Figure 2 shows the evolution of the percentage of OPHs by age in Spain from 1991 to 2011. Its relative increase was concentrated in two specific segments of the population: young adults (under 40) and the oldest elderly (80+). For instance, barely 3% of the population aged 30–34 lived alone in 1991 in comparison to the 10% recorded in 2011 (in other words, the proportion of OPHs for this age bracket tripled during this period). For the elderly the bulk of the increase took place from 1991 to 2001; from that point until 2011 it remained stable. The age pattern of OPHs does not differ substantially between men and women save for the oldest age groups.

Invariably, the sex ratio of OPHs is higher than 1 (masculinized) until age 50–54 and it is lower than 1 (feminized) from that age group onwards (analysis not shown).

The demographic profile of OPHs diversified during the period analysed (Figure 3). In terms of age, in 1991 more than half of OPHs (55.38%) were over 65 years of age. This percentage had dropped to 46.58% by 2011. Conversely, a significant increase in young adult OPHs (25–39) was recorded, their relative weight in the population of solo dwellers shifting from 13.36% in 1991 to 23.76% in 2011, thus representing an increase of nearly 78%.

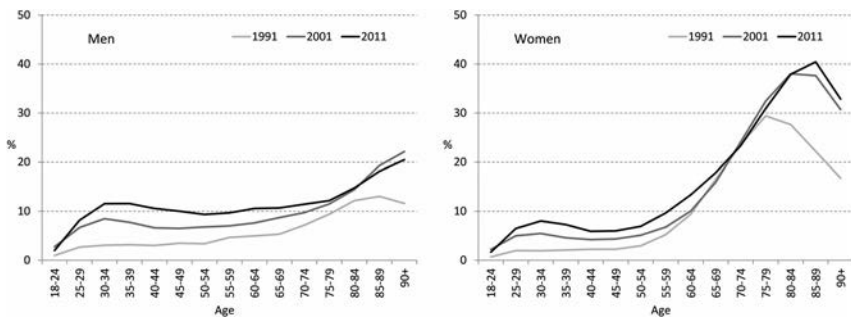


Figure 2. Percentage of OPHs by age. Spain, 1991, 2001 and 2011. Source. Own calculations from census microdata.

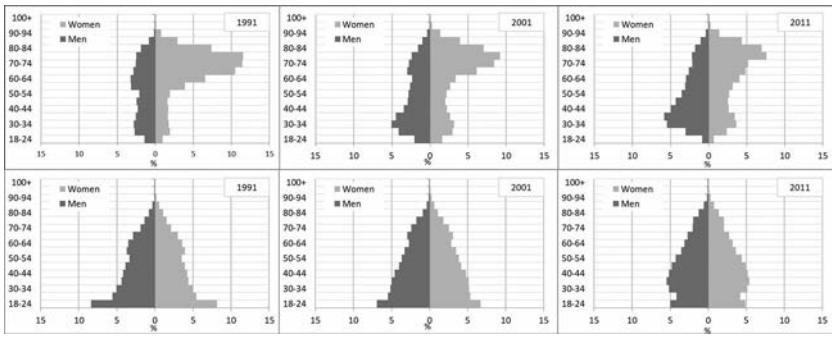


Figure 3. Age and sex distribution of the population: OPHs (upper panel) vs. rest of the population (lower panel). Spain, 1991, 2001, 2011. Source. Own calculations from INE census microdata.

By sex, in 1991 the dominant profile among older OPHs (65+) was markedly female: 80% were women, giving a *sex ratio* of 0.24. By 2011, the sex ratio had shifted to 0.34 in this age segment. In contrast, among young adults the sex ratio of OPHs remained stable and male-dominated (around 1.5) between 1991 and 2011.

Moving on to an inter-generational comparison (Figure 4), as a general rule the proportion of people living alone at a given age has increased among the different generation groups (this can be seen in the vertical distances between series). This increase is clearer among more recent generations and for men. In the 40–44 age group, for example, we find that the

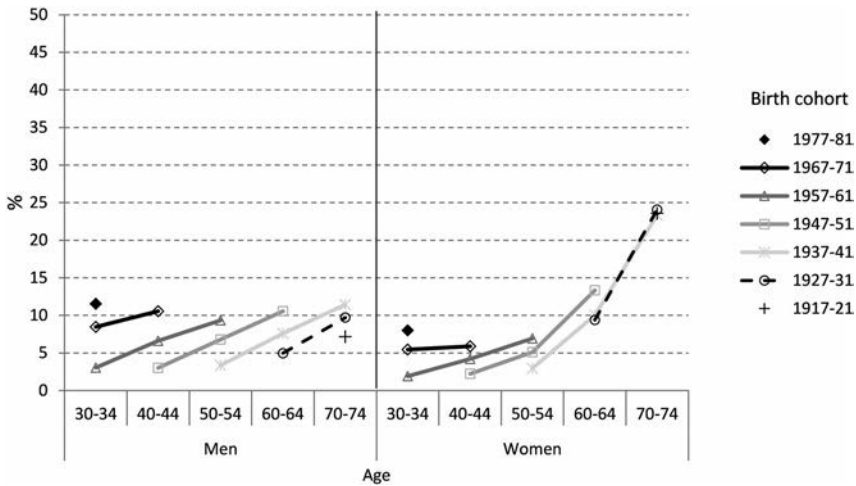


Figure 4. Percentage of OPHs by age and generation. Spain, generations 1917–1981. Source. Own calculations from INE census microdata.

proportion of men living alone was barely 3% among the 1947–51 birth cohort, but over 10% among that of 1967–71. The generational change among women is less intense in relative terms. In the same age group (40–44), the percentage of women living alone rose from approximately 2.5% (1947–51 birth cohort) to 5% (1967–71 birth cohort).

Another result worth noting is the trend followed by the groups of cohorts between successive ages. To be precise, among female cohorts born between 1927 and 1941, the proportion of OPHs grew from 10% to 25% between the ages 60–64 and 70–74, which is undoubtedly related to the fact that widowhood occurred at a relatively young age.

Remarkably, the proportion of OPHs among generations born before 1967 is very similar between men and women at the start of follow-up (ages 30–34; 40–44; 50–54). In contrast, among younger generations (1967–) a growing distinction between men and women can be observed. The *sex ratio* of OPHs invariably decreases with age in all the generation groups analysed except the youngest group of cohorts (1967–71). In this group, the *sex ratio* increases from 1.60 to 1.87 between ages 30–34 and 40–44 (Table 1).

Furthermore, we should highlight the masculinization of solo living in Spain among all the generations analysed up to the 60–64 year threshold and the feminization of OPHs among the oldest generations (65+). This pattern can firstly be explained by the feminization of widowhood, due to the longer life expectancy of women. Secondly, it is related to the fact that in other marital statuses (e.g. separation/divorce), it is usually the man who forms a one-person household, whilst other household types such as the single-parent household are more frequently formed by women (Beaumont and Mason 2014). This last point is clearly noticeable in the age groups in which couples most tend to break up (40–44 and 50–54). Illustratively, in the specific case of Spain, 65% of custodies in 2017 were given to mothers (INE 2018).

Table 1. Sex ratio of OPHs in Spain by age group and birth cohort group.

Birth cohort	Age				
	30–34	40–44	50–54	60–64	70–74
1977–81	1.51				
1967–71	1.60	1.87			
1957–61	1.63	1.56	1.33		
1947–51		1.34	1.30	0.74	
1937–41			1.10	0.70	0.42
1927–31				0.49	0.33
1917–21					0.22

Lastly, we can see that at young adult ages (30–34) solo living is undergoing a gradual inter-generational feminization, with the sex ratio shifting from 1.63 among the 1957–61 birth cohort to 1.51 among the 1977–81 birth cohort, a piece of data that goes unnoticed in the cross-sectional analysis by age. In fact, it should not be overlooked that if at age 30–34, the percentage of OPHs in Spain tripled between birth cohorts 1957–61 and 1977–81, in the case of women this proportion quadrupled, growing from 1.9% to 8%.

With regard to the marital status of OPHs in Spain (graphic analyses not shown), the prevailing status in 1991 was widow/widower (50%) whilst in 2011 it was single (44%). Expectedly, the number of widows and widowers has dropped significantly among younger generations, due to the increase in Spain of both life expectancy and second unions following widowhood and separation/divorce (these behaviours have become progressively institutionalized among younger generations; Ajenjo-Cosp and García-Saladrigas 2016). Also, we found a strong association between the fact of living alone and the status of permanent singlehood (i.e. never married). Illustratively, at age 70–74, the three groups of cohorts that can be examined (1917–21; 1927–31 and 1937–41) cluster around the same values: singlehood among those who live alone is about 20% while it is 4–7% among those who do not live alone. As for the potential effect of the evolution of permanent singlehood (i.e. never married) on the trend in the prevalence of OPHs we can ensure that this factor have not had a large influence in light of the stability of the proportions of never married people observed across age-cohort combinations from age 60 onwards.⁴

Group of Figure 5 sets out our analyses focusing on level of education. In terms of OPHs (*Panel a*), the result is quite illustrative of the process of generational replacement. For instance, among male OPHs from the 1977–81 cohorts, the proportion of men with a low education level is almost half that of the preceding group (1967–71). In the case of women the difference is even more marked, as the low education level proportion dropped from more than 30% to approximately 15%. These differences coincide with a parallel increase in the proportion of OPHs with a medium or high education level. This change is particularly intense from

⁴Previous works focused on Spain displayed that the variations in the proportion of never married people tend to remain very stable over time. Also that the variations in the proportion of non-coupled people which undoubtedly influence on the proportion of OPHs may have to do with delays in the formation of a couple rather than with an actual increase of people who decide to stay single/uncoupled (Castro-Martin *et al.* 2008).

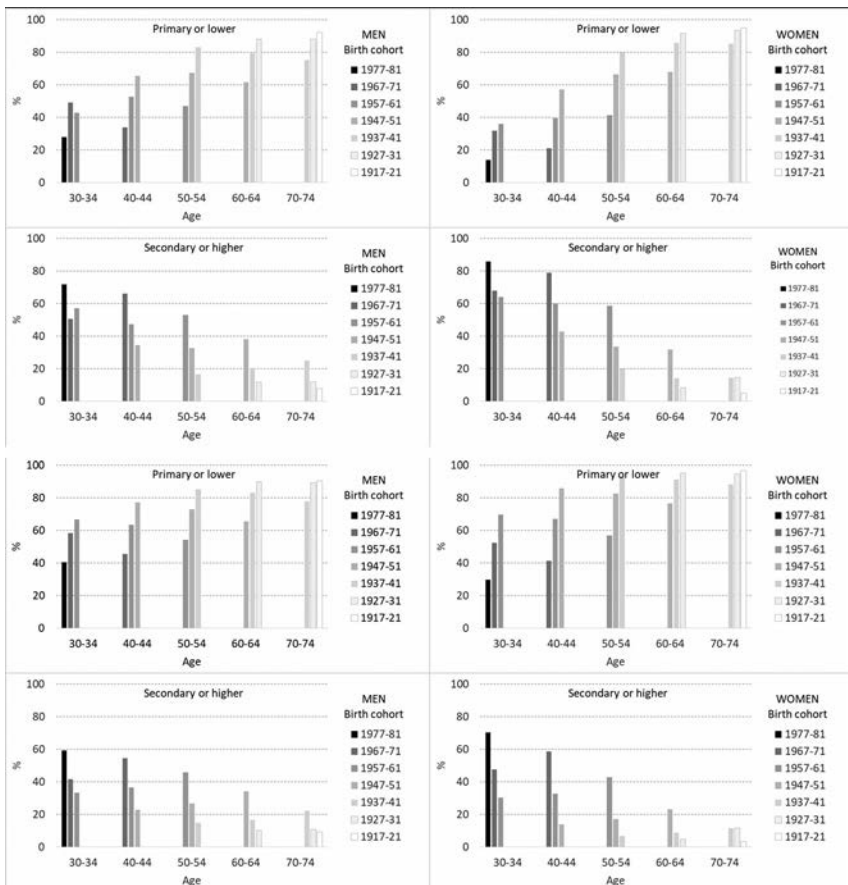


Figure 5. Population distribution by level of education, sex, age and generation (OPHs: upper panel vs. population not living alone: lower panel). Spain, generations 1917-1981. a. One-person households. b. Population not living alone. Note. This analysis examines population distribution by age and generation in each education category for men and women separately. The sum of the percentages of the two levels of education for each age and sex group equals 100 in both population types analysed: OPHs and population not living alone.

the generations born in the late 1950s onwards. We should bear in mind that these generations benefitted from the democratization of access to the middle and upper levels of official state education over the following two decades (Flecha 2011).

The above is applicable to the whole Spanish population (Panel b), but we should highlight two specificities in the case of OPHs. For instance, among men born 1977–81 who lived alone, the percentage of those who had a medium or high education level was somewhat more than 70%,

in comparison to 40% of those who did not live alone. This difference was predictable, as at the ages involved (30–34), residential independence is associated with financial autonomy and this, in turn, with being in work and working in sufficiently high-skilled jobs. The figures are even more significant in the case of women: up to 85% of those who live alone have a medium-high education level.

The concomitance between social change reflected by the generational replacement of OPHs and the gender dimension is better illustrated in [Figure 6](#), which analyses the evolution of the percentage differential between men and women in medium-high education level. This indicator's highest values are in favour of women in younger generations and specifically in OPHs.

[Tables 2–4](#) present the results of multivariate logistic regression models under the three specifications mentioned in the methods section.

Firstly, the increasing trend of OPHs in Spain over the period analysed is confirmed. Once the population age-structure and other potential co-determinants of solo-living have been controlled for, the odd of living alone increased over time in line with the results that were presented in [Figure 4](#) from a generational approach. The odd of living alone among Spaniards was 43% and 74% higher in 2001 and 2011 than in 1991 respectively ([Table 2](#)).

A second finding refers to the gendered pattern of solo living in Spain. Such pattern results to be masculinized which is partly related to the significant interactions between gender and other key covariates. For instance, the odd of living alone among separated or divorced women

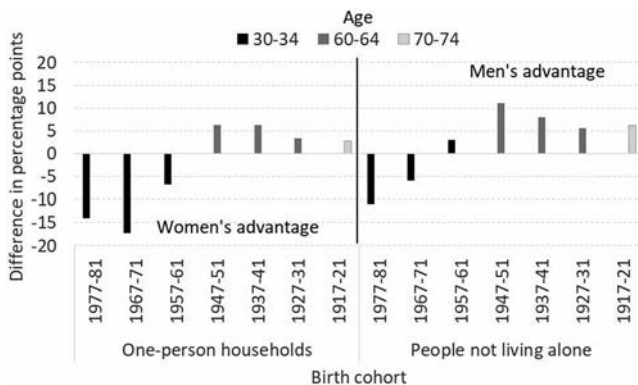


Figure 6. Gender gap in higher education levels (educational attainment secondary or higher). Spain, generations 1917–1981.

Table 2. Logistic regression (model specification *a*). Co-determinants of the odd ratio of living alone. Spain, 1991–2011.

Co-determinants	Sig.	Exp(B) odd ratio	Interaction terms	Sig.	Exp(B)
Year (1991 ref.)	.000				
2001	.000	1.426			
2011	.000	1.737			
Woman (man ref.)	.000	.826			
Marital status (single ref.)	.000				
Married	.000	.040	Married and woman	.000	.938
Widow	.000	1.247	Widow and woman	.000	.951
Separated/divorced	.000	1.331	Sep/div and woman	.000	.573
Labour status (working ref.)	.000				
Unemployed	.000	.720	Unemployed and woman	.000	.896
Retired/pension	.000	.928	Retired and woman	.000	1.065
Other	.000	.443	Other and woman	.273	1.022
Education (lower studies ref.)	.000	1.307	Higher studies and woman	.000	1.058
Age (18–24 ref.)	.000				
25–29	.000	3.238	Age group and woman	.025	1.056
30–34	.000	6.764		.156	1.034
35–39	.000	9.721		.000	.895
40–44	.000	11.198		.000	.777
45–49	.000	12.854		.000	.760
50–54	.000	15.160		.000	.877
55–59	.000	19.590		.146	1.037
60–64	.000	25.806		.000	1.174
65–69	.000	28.501		.000	1.305
70–74	.000	30.194		.000	1.460
75–79	.000	29.455		.000	1.594
80–84	.000	28.590		.000	1.478
85–89	.000	24.157		.000	1.365
90–94	.000	18.204		.000	1.209
95–99	.000	15.160		.563	.962
100+	.000	10.275		.708	1.076
Constant	.000	.184	Constant	.000	.184

decreases by 43% and also unemployed women display lower odds of living alone.

In terms of age and educational attainment, the results are also very much in line with the descriptive analyses. The age gradient in the odd of living alone peaks at age 80–84 and it decreases from then on. Higher-educated population displays a higher odd of living alone with respect to lower-educated population.⁵ As a rule, the interaction of gender and education is statistically significant. Save for the year 1991, highly-educated women display slightly higher probability of living alone (Table 2).

Finally, it is worth commenting that the increase in the odd of living alone observed in 2011 took place in an *a priori* unfavourable context.

⁵Interestingly, we found a solid positive gradient across secondary and tertiary studies in all model specifications whereas the difference in the probability of living alone between no studies and primary studies is negligible or not significant.

Table 3. Logistic regression (model specification *b*) Co-determinants of the odd ratio of living alone over time. Spain, 1991, 2001 and 2011.

	Covariates						Interaction terms						
	1991		2001		2011		1991		2001		2011		
	Sig.	Exp(B)	Sig.	Exp(B)	Sig.	Exp(B)	Sig.	Exp(B)	Sig.	Exp(B)	Sig.	Exp(B)	
Woman (man ref.)	.812	1.028	.000	.879	.000	.748							
Marital status (single ref.)													
Married	.000	.025	.000	.042	.000	.040	Married and woman	.004	1.235	.000	.919	.000	.950
Widow	.011	1.138	.000	1.282	.000	1.271	Widow and woman	.821	1.014	.000	.778	.362	1.014
Separated/divorced	.000	1.817	.000	1.631	.000	1.241	Sep/div and woman	.000	.460	.000	.441	.000	.631
Labour status (working ref.)													
Unemployed	.006	.859	.000	.760	.000	.715	Unemployed and woman	.022	.818	.000	.889	.000	.908
Retired/pension	.815	1.012	.165	.976	.000	.915	Retired and woman	.002	.808	.017	1.060	.000	1.090
Other	.000	.357	.000	.386	.000	.474	Other and woman	.174	.824	.232	1.046	.001	1.085
Education (lower studies ref.)	.000	1.741	.000	1.185	.000	1.325	Higher studies and woman	.012	.867	.000	1.072	.000	1.083
Age (18-24 ref.)													
25-29	.000	3.540	.000	2.579	.000	3.887	Age group and woman	.135	1.219	.649	1.016	.004	1.104
30-34	.000	8.278	.000	5.319	.000	8.105		.961	.993	.649	.984	.002	1.109
35-39	.000	12.684	.000	7.247	.000	11.836		.552	.920	.000	.864	.192	.958
40-44	.000	15.679	.000	7.940	.000	13.846		.970	.995	.000	.858	.000	.788
45-49	.000	22.079	.000	9.068	.000	15.831		.011	.696	.000	.850	.000	.776
50-54	.000	23.829	.000	10.922	.000	18.633		.497	.907	.005	.891	.009	.915
55-59	.000	33.430	.000	12.715	.000	24.696		.868	.978	.211	1.054	.016	1.086
60-64	.000	35.647	.000	15.334	.000	33.451		.007	1.431	.000	1.228	.000	1.207
65-69	.000	34.882	.000	17.608	.000	36.885		.000	2.175	.000	1.464	.000	1.279
70-74	.000	41.234	.000	17.950	.000	39.576		.000	2.076	.000	1.884	.000	1.341
75-79	.000	43.484	.000	18.925	.000	36.852		.000	1.843	.000	1.954	.000	1.540
80-84	.000	36.745	.000	18.488	.000	35.653		.011	1.469	.000	1.779	.000	1.467
85-89	.000	25.718	.000	18.085	.000	29.012		.103	1.327	.000	1.371	.000	1.428
90-94	.000	16.487	.000	13.528	.000	21.795		.180	1.426	.002	1.263	.000	1.249
95-99	.000	17.311	.000	13.688	.000	17.209		.511	.691	.270	.853	.624	1.039
100+	.024	11.325	.000	14.505	.000	9.975		.606	1.906	.065	.473	.134	1.419
Constant	.201	.250	.000	.170	.000	.351							

Table 4. Logistic regression (model specification c). Co-determinants of the odd ratio of living alone for men and women. Spain, 1991–2011.

	Men		Women	
	Sig.	Exp(B)	Sig.	Exp(B)
Year (1991 ref.)				
2001	.000	1.570	.000	1.341
2011	.000	1.934	.000	1.619
Marital status (single ref.)				
Married	.000	.040	.000	.037
Widow	.000	1.253	.000	1.185
Separated/divorced	.000	1.329	.000	.763
Labour status (working ref.)				
Unemployed	.000	.718	.000	.646
Retired/pension	.000	.928	.130	.987
Other	.000	.442	.000	.451
Educational attainment (lower studies ref.)	.000	1.304	.000	1.385
Age (18-24 ref.)				
25–29	.000	3.230	.000	3.420
30–34	.000	6.733	.000	7.003
35–39	.000	9.667	.000	8.717
40–44	.000	11.130	.000	8.718
45–49	.000	12.770	.000	9.788
50–54	.000	15.058	.000	13.320
55–59	.000	19.475	.000	20.340
60–64	.000	25.650	.000	30.333
65–69	.000	28.312	.000	37.230
70–74	.000	29.985	.000	44.134
75–79	.000	29.202	.000	47.066
80–84	.000	28.323	.000	42.417
85–89	.000	23.901	.000	33.131
90–94	.000	17.998	.000	22.122
95–99	.000	14.974	.000	14.666
100+	.000	10.166	.000	11.122
Constant	.000	.124	.000	.102

That is to say, the proportion of unemployed people in the census sample of 2011 was the highest of the period by far and it is apparent that such status diminishes the odds of living alone as shown on [Table 2](#).

[Table 3](#) compares the ability of covariates and interaction terms to explain the odd of living alone across census years. A first remarkable result is that the gendered-pattern of solo living reported in the former model specification was not observed in 1991 but it developed from then on.

It is apparent that labour status increased its ability to explain solo living over the period analysed. Also, higher educational attainment, though systematically contributing to higher odds of living alone, did so to a much greater extent in 1991 (74%) than in subsequent census (18% in 2001 and 32% in 2011). It is interesting to point out that such effect reversed among women as highly educated women displayed lower odds of living alone in 1991 whereas they displayed higher odds to form an OPH since 2001.

Finally, [Table 4](#) reports on the differences in the influence of the covariates between men and women separately (no interaction term is included in this case). As expected, the results of the odds ratios for the main covariates analysed point in the same direction of those displayed in the former specifications. However, some results are worth commenting in that they supplement them effectively.

As for the trend over time, the results confirm a progressive masculinization of solo-living in Spain. The odd of becoming an OPH almost doubled (93%) among men in 2011 in comparison to 1991. Among women the increase in such odd with respect to 1991 was noticeably lower (34% and 62% in 2001 and 2011 respectively). The influence of widowhood does not differ to a large extent between men and women once other covariates are controlled for. By contrast separation/divorce is confirmed as a more important potential determinant of the odd of living alone among men. However, it is apparent from the results that age concentrates the bulk of gender differences due to its association with marital status and other gender-related situations. To this regard, men exhibit higher odd of living alone until age 54 and the opposite occurs from age 55 onwards. As for educational attainment, the results confirm a slightly larger effect of higher educational levels in explaining the formation of OPHs among women (38% higher odd of living alone in front of 30% in the case of men).

Discussion

By studying the characteristics and evolution of OPHs, this work aims to open up new lines of research in order to address the significance, nature and social outcomes of solo living in Spain and other European societies. To be sure, both the trends and sociodemographic patterns displayed in this work invite to conclude that Spain is partaking vividly of the growing variety of residential forms which characterized all European societies since the 1980s (Fokkema and Libefbroer 2008). It could be said that the growth of OPHs in this country over recent decades shares the same factors as have been described for Western societies as a whole (Hall *et al.* 1997). These factors act with varying intensity over the course of the adult life cycle: growing number of elderly people, whose life expectancy and, more importantly, physical and financial autonomy allow them to live alone (especially in the case of women); growing number of separations and divorces (which lead, particularly for older adults and men, to the formation of OPHs); growing number

of people who choose residential independence without associating it with marriage or cohabitation (especially young adults and men).

Firstly, our results reflect that the rise in this type of household has cut across age and gender lines in Spain over the last two decades. It has gone from having a feminized and elderly demographic profile in 1991 to a more diversified profile in age terms, among both men and women. By way of illustration, the most common status of people living alone in Spain in 2011 was single (a significant change from 1991, when it was widow/widower).

With regard to the elderly, the rise in OPHs in Spain from 1991 to 2001 was highly noticeable; then the proportion remained stable from 2001 to 2011. In all good sense, this stabilization in the latter decade cannot be attributed to a deterioration in the health and living conditions of elderly Spaniards (Abellán and Esparza 2010; López-Doblas and Díaz-Conde 2013; Cámara *et al.* 2015; López-Villanueva and Pujadas-Rubies 2018) but rather, in all likelihood, to processes of family regrouping in the midst of the deep economic recession that the country sank into in 2008 (Foessa 2014: 78); in which case, we are dealing with an adaptive reconfiguration of pre-existing OPHs and not, strictly speaking, a change in trend.

The most rampant relative growth in OPHs in Spain between 1991 and 2011 took place in young people. This is an important novelty within the rising trend of OPHs in Spain as both absolute and relative increase until 1991 was headed by the elderly (Valero 1995). Actually, this result from census data clearly invites to revise previous conclusions obtained from the analysis of other sources (i.e. that very little change in the percentage of young and middle aged men and women living on their own was observed during the 1990s and early 2000s in Southern Europe; Fokkema and Liefbroer 2008: 1378). Simply, this is not the case for Spain and thus the hypothesis of divergence in living arrangements between Southern and Northern Europe seem to us questionable (at least in light of the behaviour of Spanish OPHs).

Also, the fact is particularly striking if we consider that the inter-generational increase of solo living at young adult ages came about in a context of delayed leaving from the family home which is not exclusive of Spain (Ayllón 2009; Fokkema and Liefbroer 2008: 1411). Such inter-generational increase of young OPHs appears to be indicative of a change in life transitions within adulthood: from a residential independence highly associated with living together in a couple (married couple in the specific case of Spain; Baizan *et al.* 2003; Holdsworth 2005), to one in which solo

living gradually gains ground. No doubt, this fact may have partly to do with the *democratization of personal life and privacy* (Skolnick 1991; Giddens 1992) or a *new emotional order* based on a reconfiguration of intimate relationships and reciprocities, of which solo living would be a structural consequence (Bawin-Legros 2001, 2004). Another argument along these lines is a sort of rational utilitarianism which leads people to opt for individualism and its residential consequence: advantages of solo living (freedom of choice and diversity in outlook and approach to life) versus the disadvantages of family life (with the countless limitations and personal sacrifices involved; De Julios 1995). In other words, when the material conditions of life allow it, the way is opened to a cultural preference for privacy, freedom and independence, values which would largely be fulfilled by living alone (White 1994; Beck-Gernsheim 2002).

Certainly, the results from the logistic regression models in our work display that, once changes in demographic structure as well as in other concomitant factors such as marital status and labour status are controlled for, the trend in the formation of OPHs has increased continuously in Spain over the last decades. This would invite to believe that the rise of this residential form may respond to attitudinal changes associated with the generational replacement of the population. Two points would support this hypothesis, namely that the increase of OPHs among young Spaniards did not stop during times of economic recession and that the probability of living alone follows a similar pattern by age at the three census analysed. Thus, residential independence to strike out on one's own could be down to a shift in attitude, which in turn is related to a change in the social significance of this kind of household: from 'failure' in a context of strong institutionalization of marriage and family, where the tradition of living together was instilled in the generations raised under Franco's regime (pre-democratic Spain), to 'success' in the modern context, one of fierce competitiveness beset with difficulties in entering the job market under acceptable conditions (Del Campo and Rodríguez-Brioso 2002). On this point, it has been argued that society has become increasingly accepting of solo living, and that the prejudices which used to weigh heavily on the various sociological profiles embodied by OPHs have fallen into steep decline (DePaulo 2006).

Nevertheless, we must moderate the former arguments as they rest on the sole basis of quantitative evidence. Indeed, alternative or supplementary interpretations of our results would make sense. For instance, that the inter-generational increase in OPHs among young Spaniards be a direct reflection of the socioeconomic determinants involved. In this regard

we should note that the generational replacement of OPHs at these young adult ages is mainly being driven by highly educated segments of the population and that they probably have access to skilled jobs, which in itself would increase the possibility of leaving from parental home. The latter is not contradictory with the fact that higher education (i.e. secondary and tertiary studies) has diminished its ability in explaining the probability of living alone between 1991 and 2011 as the share of the highly educated in Spain has risen as well.⁶ Let us look at the case of young Spanish women in order to illustrate these points.

Those who live alone fit the profile of high education level in a higher proportion than men and the estimated odds of living alone point accordingly in that the educational gradient is systematically higher among women. When we use four categories of studies, it results that the gender differential in the positive association of solo living with education reaches its maximum at university studies. At such level, women display 68% higher probability of living alone in front of 47% in the case of men. Finally, the interaction of being a woman and having high education also results significant for a higher probability of living alone. These findings are in line with previous research dealing with Spanish women specifically, which found that, among other factors, the attainment of high studies deterred co-residential partnerships (Castro-Martín *et al.* 2008). Furthermore, the empirical evidence provided in our work begs the question whether highly-educated women are simply more inclined to live alone (i.e. they do it by choice) or if their circumstances dictate that they 'need to live and remain alone'.

This question is relevant in a social context of increasing competitiveness in the professional terrain and of the greater flexibility and mobility required in less stable job conditions. In such a context, progress in gender equality in the field of work often clashes with the preservation of traditional roles in other spheres, such as that of residential relationships

⁶Previous research found a reversed pattern of educational gradient in relation to the probability of living alone. Vitali (2010) coped with within-Spain differences in young adults' living arrangements and she found that the probability to live outside the parental home in Spain in 2001 (either with or without a partner) was lower among those young men and women with higher educational level and it was higher among those with lower educational level with respect to a reference category of secondary studies. The author argues that such probability decreases with educational level achieved, probably because the lower educated enter the job market relatively earlier than those who achieved higher education. Unfortunately, the research basis of Vitali's paper differ substantially from ours as she analysed the population aged 17–35 who lived in municipalities of more than 20,000 inhabitants. Aside of the noticeable restriction that the age range implies in generational terms (thus in the ability of educational attainment to explain socioeconomic differences and thus the actual possibility of leaving the parental home) it must be noted that 35% of the Spanish population and about 95% of municipalities were excluded from her analysis.

in Spain (Durán 1999; Tobío 2001; Del Campo and Rodríguez-Brioso 2002; Gumà *et al.* 2015; Kasearu *et al.* 2017). In line with these reflections, a recent research that coped with working-age population across 12 European countries (Spain was not included; Sandström and Karlsson 2019) showed tenuous or non-existent association between education and solo living in more gender-egalitarian countries whereas the opposite tend to occur in less gender egalitarian countries. Specifically, a significant and strong positive educational gradient of living alone for both genders was found for the country that scored the lowest value on gender equality in the study, namely Italy. Authors concluded that, as a rule, the positive educational gradient of living alone in less gender-equal countries is driven to a greater extent by women than men thus bringing gender inequality levels as a key factor. To this regard, they put on the table that gender egalitarian values have not yet achieved a 'dominant normative status' so that women with higher human capital still experience difficulties combining family life with the desire to pursue a career.

Our view is that, definitively, this dimension of gender ought to be taken into account when explaining the more selective profile of young women in OPHs. In other words, for these young people, and especially for these young women, solo living could be interpreted as both a renewed expression of individuality and its social projection, and a strategy of adaptation to structural determinants. The effects of these determinants would moreover be harder on young women.

Another salient change revealed by our results in generational terms was observed in the separated/divorced group, and this change becomes fully visible at older adult ages (50-64). For the generations analysed, the percentage of separated/divorced OPHs tripled in Spain between 1991 and 2011. This change illustrates the diversification of lifestyles and the increase in options in a social context typified by the loss of influence or relative deinstitutionalization of marriage and family. The phenomenon has been widely discussed in the literature. Giddens (1991), for example, refers to people seeking 'pure relationships' and demanding mutual emotional fulfilment in their unions, once the typical financial and social determinants of past society have been overcome. Otherwise there would be no need to justify staying in a relationship, especially when separation or divorce are not only viable legal options but are also socially institutionalized.

From our results we can conclude that, as in other aspects of the Second Demographic Transition, the rise in OPHs in Spain came about relatively late in comparison with other European societies, but the process was

more rapid and intense. This is most certainly a specificity of Spain within the European context. Since the concurrence of drivers for social innovation, fostered by the new social pact born of the reestablishment of democracy (Pérez-Díaz 2002), the Spanish population has experienced a dynamic of constant social change, bringing the country in line with the pattern of structural changes that characterizes the Western model. For its part, given the speed of socioeconomic and cultural change in Spain over the second half of the twentieth century, the rise in OPHs is accompanied by strong contrasts in the sociodemographic profile of solo dwellers during the process of generational replacement. Thus in most developed Western societies, the protagonists of the Second Demographic Transition were the generations born after the Second World War. These generations reached adulthood and the ages of parental home leaving, cohabitation and procreation during the 1960s and 70s. In contrast, the socio-historical context of those years in Spain was one of a dictatorship that fostered traditional and highly conservative values and cultural practices, and considerably delayed economic development in comparison with the rest of Western Europe. This undoubtedly affected the social ideology of the times and the real possibilities of creating new types of household for the generations born between 1940 and 1970. Divorce, for instance, was not legal in Spain until 1981, and a wife's practical dependence on her husband (head of the family) was considerable until relatively recently. It was therefore the generations born into the new democratic era that drove the process of change that took place in other European countries two or three decades earlier.

The intense and cross-cutting nature of the change, once started, is evident in the results presented in this paper. Not only have we confirmed that there has been an inter-generational increase in OPHs but also that in all the generation groups analysed, the proportion of OPHs increased with age. The latter is undoubtedly related to the social institutionalization of certain statuses such as singlehood, separation or divorce, as well as the consequences of socioeconomic change (very specifically the rapid increase in the participation of women in the job market and the ensuing change in the traditional utility of marriage for women; Becker 1981; Toharia 1997; Simó *et al.* 2002; Simó and Solsona 2003; Domínguez-Folgueras and Castro-Martín 2008; Domínguez-Folgueras 2011; Salido 2015). Furthermore, although certainly in an indirect and limited sense, the evidence obtained is in keeping with qualitative studies that prompt us to question the teleological view of life (revolving around cohabitation as a necessary outcome of personal relations; Roseneil 2006).

We should insist to finish that the picture obtained through census data on the evolution of OPHs in Spain does not capture the complexity and dynamism inherent to this type of household. To this regard, it must be acknowledged that in today's society the transitions between different living arrangements, particularly between living alone or with others, are more frequent over the course of our lives (Smith *et al.* 2005) and that this again is connected with both more opportunities for choice and greater flexibility and uncertainty due to structural determinants. Less still our work can fully capture the interaction between the progressive establishment of a 'culture of the individual' (propensity to live alone) associated with a change in the nature of social connections and social institutions. This said, it is apparent that those social institutions have lost influence in the regulation or articulation of many behaviours to a point where the balance has tipped from the collective or community sphere to the individual sphere (Sennett 2011). It is still to be determined the actual implications and individual/social challenges associated with these changes. For instance, the difficulties that such changes present for some personal aspirations (Fokkema and Liefbroer 2008; Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995), the deterioration of family and community ties and its potential derivations in terms of isolation (Bauman 1995; Bellah *et al.* 1985; Putnam 2000), or the intrinsic vulnerability of solo living among some sociodemographic profiles and/or in some specific contexts (Bennet and Dixon 2006; Yeung and Cheung 2015).

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