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Descriptive Finding

**LAT relationships: A new living arrangement
among the oldest old population in Germany?**

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LAT relationships: A new living arrangement among the oldest old population in Germany?

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

Although there is a lot of research analyzing the distribution and pluralization of living arrangements, only a few studies have focused on the partnership forms of the oldest old population. In particular, very little is known about the prevalence of ‘living-apart-together’ (LAT) relationships in this age group.

OBJECTIVE

This study examines the extent of coresidential partnerships and LAT relationships among the population aged 80 years and older in the most populated German state, North Rhine-Westphalia.

METHODS

We use cross-sectional data from the 2016–2018 survey Quality of Life and Subjective Well-Being of the Very Old in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW80+). The representative sample contains 1,863 individuals aged 80 years or older, including 211 nursing home residents. We present descriptive statistics considering differences in gender, age, and marital status.

RESULTS

The average share of LAT relationships among old-age partnerships is 13.3%. While the share of partnerships is declining among the oldest old individuals from the age of 80 years onward, the proportion of LAT relationships in relation to coresidential partnerships is increasing. Marital unions in which partners do not share a common household turned out to be a prevalent living arrangement.

CONTRIBUTION

This is the first study to examine the extent of LAT relationships among the oldest old population in Germany. We demonstrate with unique data that LAT relationships are a common partnership type in old age. While most studies concentrate on partnerships with

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joint households, the extent of new living arrangements in old age could be underestimated and should receive more attention in current research.

1. Introduction

The examination of partnership forms among the old and the oldest old population is an important research topic for sociologists and demographers because a partner is a crucial social resource in old age. For older adults, being in a partnership is linked to higher life satisfaction (Solé-Auró and Cortina 2019) and positive health behavior (Hilz and Wagner 2018), and the partner is the person most frequently involved in domestic care (Schneekloth 2006). We know from previous studies for Germany that the proportion of people aged between 70 and 85 years living in a partnership increased between 1996 and 2014 (Engstler and Klaus 2017). Nevertheless, among older adults the proportion of partnerships decreases with age – due to higher life expectancy, especially among women (Lengerer 2016). While more than 60% of men aged 80 years and older are still married, it is less than one-fourth of oldest old women (Nowossadeck and Engstler 2013). This pattern is also reflected in the household composition: In contrast to men, the majority of women at this age are living in single-person households (Tesch-Römer and Engstler 2020).

A special type of partnership is a nonresidential or ‘living-apart-together’ (LAT) relationship, defined as a relationship in which the partners do not share a common household but describe themselves as a couple and are perceived as such by others (Haskey 2005; Levin and Trost 1999). The spread of LAT relationships is well documented for Europe and the United States (Pasteels, Lyssens-Danneboom, and Mortelmans 2017; Régnier-Loilier, Beaujouan, and Villeneuve-Gokalp 2009; Castro-Martín, Domínguez-Folgueras, and Martín-García 2008; Strohm et al. 2009). For Germany, Liefbroer, Poortman, and Seltzer (2015) report with data from the Generations and Gender Survey that around 9% of the population aged between 18 and 79 years have a partner with whom they are not living together. Late-life studies mainly focus on LAT as a relationship with a new partner after the dissolution of a previous, more institutionalized union (e.g., de Jong Gierveld 2004). Possible reasons for LAT relationships among older adults are to maintain autonomy and to avoid negative experiences from previous coresidential partnerships (Benson and Coleman 2016; Funk and Kobayashi 2016). Widowed women in particular also mention the avoidance of caregiving obligations as a motive not to remarry (Davidson 2001; see also Benson and Coleman 2016: 803).

Nevertheless, we know little about the distribution of LAT relationships among the oldest old population in Germany for two main reasons: Most previous studies on the plurality of living arrangements do not consider very old people explicitly (e.g., Dorbritz, Weinmann, and Estatico 2018; Wagner and Valdés Cifuentes 2014; Brüderl 2004), and only a few of them focus on people aged above 80 years (e.g., Lengerer 2016; Nowossadeck and Engstler 2013). However, most of the latter studies do not account for LAT relationships because especially German microcensus data is limited on households as observation units.

Neglecting LAT in old age leads to two major problems. First, people who do not share their household with their partner would be spuriously categorized as ‘single’ (Strohm et al. 2009; Roseneil 2006). Second, among the oldest old population, living arrangements like LAT relationships could be of a special nature. Among younger people, LAT often represents an early relationship stage or are motivated by job-related constraints. However, transitions in living arrangements are not only driven by choice but can also occur involuntarily or unintentionally – for example, by the death of the partner or children leaving the parental home (Wagner, Franzmann, and Stauder 2001: 56). If nonresidential partnerships in old age are not considered sufficiently, the conditions and the character of LAT relationships in this age group remain unclear, and the ongoing debate on the pluralization of living arrangements is left with a big blind spot.

We therefore examine how coresidential and, in particular, nonresidential partnerships are distributed among people aged 80 years and older. We use unique data for the oldest old population in the most populated German state, North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW), from the representative survey NRW80+. Thus, we will provide new insights into the living arrangements of oldest old individuals beyond the scope of official statistics. In contrast to other definitions of LAT relationships (e.g., Strohm et al. 2009), we consider both unmarried and married LAT partners. Because the proportion of people moving to nursing homes is increasing with age (Tesch-Römer and Engstler 2020), we assume a growing share of coresidential partnerships changing to LAT. The main issues addressed in this paper are (a) the prevalence of LAT relationships in old age, (b) their relation to coresidential partnerships, and (c) the distribution of different living arrangements based on the marital status of these partnerships.

2. Data and methods

We use data from the 2016–2018 representative study Quality of Life and Subjective Well-Being of the Very Old in North Rhine-Westphalia (NRW80+; Wagner et al. 2018). The cross-sectional dataset includes a sample of 1,863 individuals drawn from

registration offices of 94 communities in NRW. The respondents were aged 80 to 102 years at the survey date (born 1915–1937). The data contains information on demographic characteristics, relationships, and the subjective well-being of the oldest old population. Of the respondents, 211 persons were living in nursing homes, and 176 proxy interviews with relatives or caregivers were included for the respondents who were unable to participate due to health reasons. The sample was stratified by gender and age. Men and older individuals (aged 85 years and older) are overrepresented. We use sampling weights to adjust for their disproportionate representation (Pfeffermann 1996).

The NRW80+ data has important advantages for this study. First, it provides very recent representative details on the living conditions of the oldest old population. Second, because of the oversampling of men and of older persons and the information given by the proxies, it is possible to analyze subgroups who are particularly hard to reach. Finally, as data for partnerships that are independent of households is provided, we can identify LAT relationships.

We use variables on gender and age from register data, as well as on the household type (private household or nursing home), based on the interviewer's assessment. The item on marital status indicates whether the respondents are married or not (including being widowed, divorced, or separated). Respondents who were not married were additionally asked, "Do you currently have an intimate partner?" (German: "Haben Sie derzeit einen festen Partner oder eine feste Partnerin?"). We used these items to construct a variable on partnership status containing both being married or having an intimate partner. The NRW80+ data also includes items to measure the household composition. Independently from partnership status, the respondents were asked to name a maximum of three housemates and to specify their relationship according to a given list (like partner, sibling, child, or friend). We used this information to create a variable indicating whether a respondent is or is not residing with a partner. If the respondents reported that they are living with their partner in the same household without being married, the partnership was defined as unmarried cohabitation. If the respondents said that they have a partner but without indicating that they are sharing their household with their partner, the partnership was defined as LAT relationship.

We dropped 9 cases because of incomplete or ambiguous information on partnership status or household composition. Therefore, the final sample consists of 1,854 individuals. Sample characteristics of the used variables are provided in Table 1. We present descriptive statistics on the distribution of coresidential and nonresidential partnerships considering differences in gender, age, and marital status.

Table 1: Sample characteristics

	Number of cases	Percentage
Gender		
Female	932	50.3
Male	922	49.7
Age		
80–84 years	722	38.9
85–89 years	624	33.7
90 years and older	508	27.4
Household type		
Private household	1,643	88.6
Nursing home	211	11.4
Marital status		
Married	752	40.6
Not married	1,102	59.4
Partnership status		
With partner	822	44.3
Without partner	1,032	55.7
Household composition		
With partner	731	39.4
Without partner	1,123	60.6

Note: n = 1,854; unweighted data.
Source: NRW80+.

3. Results

Table 2 shows the distribution of the partnership status by age and gender. While 40.8% of the individuals aged 80 years and older have a coresidential or nonresidential partner, this proportion strongly declines from 52.6% in the age group 80 to 84 years to 16.3% in the oldest age group of 90 years and older. Compared to men, the share of women who have a partner in old age is especially low (71.3% vs. 23.5%). The total share of LAT relationships among all oldest old individuals is 5.4%, and the share of coresidential partnerships amounts to 35.4%. Unlike the extent of coresidential unions, the overall prevalence of LAT relationships decreases only slightly with age. The proportion of men

with a LAT partner is higher than the proportion of women. However, given the lower total share of partnerships among women, LAT relationships could also be a relevant partnership type for the female population. Additional analyses (not shown here) indicate that the proportion of LAT relationships in nursing homes (14.5%) is notably higher than it is in private households (3.9%).

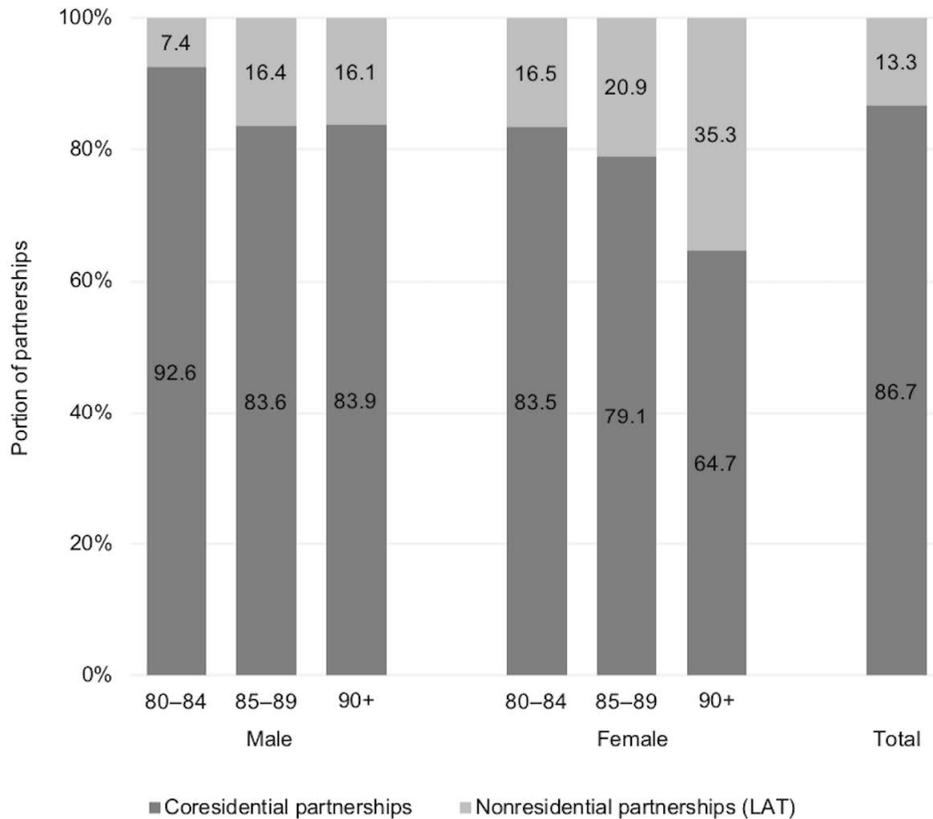
Table 2: Partnerships among the oldest old population

Partnership status	Age in years			Gender		Total
	80–84	85–89	90+	Male	Female	
Coresidential partner	46.8%	26.3%	12.8%	63.9%	19.2%	35.4%
Nonresidential partner	5.8%	5.7%	3.5%	7.4%	4.3%	5.4%
Without partner	47.4%	68.1%	83.7%	28.7%	76.6%	59.2%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Number of cases	722	624	508	922	932	1,854

Note: Weighted data.
Source: NRW80+.

Figure 1 illustrates the relation of coresidential to nonresidential partnerships, in total and differentiated by gender and age group. The overall share of LAT relationships among all partnerships in old age is 13.3%. The proportion of coresidential partnerships is declining, whereas the relative importance of LAT as a partnership type is increasing with age. However, this increase is more pronounced for women. Among women in the age group of 90 years and older, more than every third partnership is a LAT relationship.

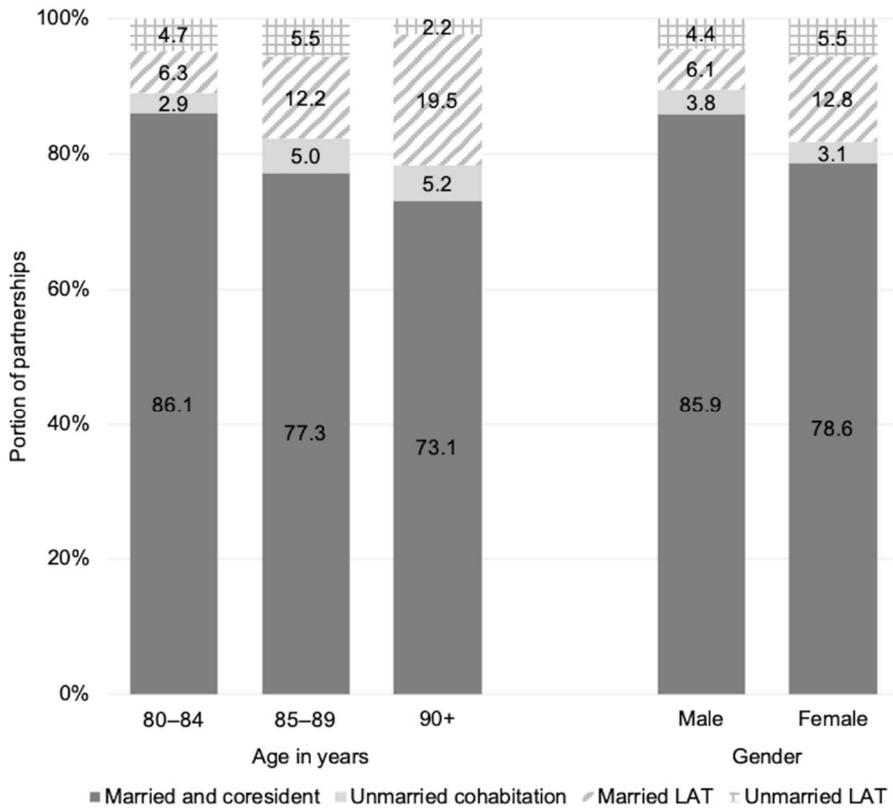
Figure 1: LAT relationships among partnerships in old age



Note: n = 822; weighted data.
Source: NRW80+.

Figure 2 provides additional information on marital status with four classifications of living arrangements: (a) unmarried LAT, (b) married LAT, (c) unmarried cohabitation, and (d) married and coresident. The prevalence of coresidential marriages decreases with age, while the proportions of unmarried cohabitation and married LAT rise. Particularly remarkable is our finding that the majority of LAT relationships in old age are among married partners. In the age group 85 to 89 years nearly every eighth partnership, and in the oldest age group every fifth partnership, is a LAT relationship between spouses. Furthermore, the share of married LAT is more than twice as high for women as for men. In total, 64.1% of the LAT partners are married.

Figure 2: Living arrangements among partnerships in old age



Note: n = 822; weighted data.
Source: NRW80+.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The likelihood of living in a partnership strongly declines from the age of 80 years onward, but for those who do have a partner, the relevance of LAT relationships increases with age. Our findings indicate that LAT relationships are a common partnership type in old age, particularly among very old women. Moreover, we found that a high proportion of these LAT relationships are among married spouses.

The rather high prevalence of LAT relationships could be a consequence of older adults' preferences for less institutionalized partnerships after widowhood or separation from their former coresidential partner, such as for reasons of independence (Benson and Coleman 2016). But a LAT relationship might also be with the same long-term partner after a stage of coresidential living. Given the high share of LAT partners who are married, this seems to be the case among the oldest old population in particular. As initially mentioned, one of the factors leading to LAT in old age could be the increasing need for institutional care. If one partner has to move to a nursing home for health reasons, a coresidential partnership might turn into a LAT relationship unintentionally. This assumption is supported by the high proportion of LAT relationships observed among nursing home residents.

While at younger life stages, LAT is often a voluntary step at the start of a further sequence of more institutionalized unions (Régnier-Loilier 2016), it seems that in old age, LAT relationships often occur involuntarily at the end of the course of a former coresidential partnership. Hence, LAT relationships among oldest old people appear to have a special nature and to be different from LAT relationships usually considered in family research. The meaning and the consequences of such living arrangements for the partners could be of particular interest for future research.

By providing new insights, our results contribute to a better understanding of the living arrangements of the oldest old population in Germany. We show that LAT relationships are common among partnerships in old age. As most studies focus on partnerships within joint households, the prevalence of LAT relationships could be underestimated. Not sharing a household with a partner does not necessarily imply to be single (Asendorpf 2008: 751) – and, at least in the case of old age, it does not even imply not to be married. Hence, if LAT is not considered, the living arrangements of oldest old people cannot be described adequately. Moreover, treating LAT relationships and marriages as distinct living arrangements might be misleading when studying old age (e.g., Broese van Groenou, te Riele, and de Jong Gierveld 2019; Lewin 2017).

Our findings have some shortcomings due to data limitations. First, the number of cases of LAT couples was too small to apply elaborated statistical models. Second, because of the lack of longitudinal data, we could not distinguish age and cohort effects for the observed differences between the age groups. Third, as we did not have dyadic partner information, we were not able to analyze the precise extent of LAT relationships resulting from transitions to institutional care. These shortcomings also represent a great opportunity for future research to investigate the pattern of LAT between spouses we detected.

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