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**UNCOUPLED ADULTS:
A STUDY OF URBAN LIFE
WITHOUT A PARTNER AND CHILDREN**

- summary -

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The general purpose, objectives and theoretical premises of the research

People getting married much later or not at all, no longer being in a hurry or wanting to become parents, and living alone are social realities currently observed and studied on all continents. They have complex social roots and implications, and a multi-perspective approach can offer a better understanding of these social developments.

In Western European societies, life outside marriage has been a social and demographic phenomenon of rather significant proportions for several centuries now. Western social research on this topic started developing in the middle of the 20th century. In the rest of the world, these issues have come to public and academic attention over the last two decades. These global preoccupations led to the development of a new interdisciplinary field named “Singles [Singlehood or Singleness] Studies”. However, social research in Romania remains anchored almost exclusively to the issues and evolution of the family and the couple. “Celibatul” and “celibatarii” [being never married and the never-marrieds] are usually mentioned when nonmarital alternatives are listed, but they have never been the focus of social studies. With a few exceptions, the same can be said for people without children.

This research has aimed to explore the phenomenon of living outside marriage and coupledness and without children from a multidimensional perspective. It followed the historical evolutions within the Romanian society and the life experiences of the never-married, uncoupled and childless adults aged over the national and urban average age at first marriage. The general purpose of this research has been to create an academic precedent for opening up a “discussion” on this topic in Romania.

The main objectives of this study have been the following:

- To explore the phenomenon of life outside marriage, coupledness and parenthood and identify the possible particularities of the Romanian space and its urban environment;
- To explore the experiences of never-married, uncoupled and childless adults and how they reflect wider social contexts;
- To identify the circumstances involved in maintaining the civil and parental status quo;
- To identify possible research directions for the future.

The following research questions were considered:

- What are the specific elements of the Romanian (sociocultural) space in terms of living outside marriage, without a partner and children?
- What is the sociodemographic profile of those who advanced through life without marital and parental commitments?

- What circumstances, objective and subjective, led them to this moment in their lives?
- What are the consequences of getting older as an unmarried adult, without children and possibly a partner?

The general framework in which this study was conceived reflects its exploratory nature and interdisciplinary perspective. No working hypotheses were formulated, and no theory was tested. However, this study started from a number of ideas and principles developed by several social researchers. It is, foremost, about the way C. Wright Mills understood “social science” as an intellectual endeavor that aims at presenting a complete image of reality - a reality in which the individual and the social are inseparable, and the present is integrated into history.¹ According to Mills, the framework of any analysis must be broad enough to encompass the diversity of societies and human beings, that is, to include different social universes that existed throughout history. Mills argued that the historical and the comparative perspective are inextricably linked. Man, he said, is a social actor who must be understood in the complexity of his interactions with social structures and historical contexts. Therefore, a complete social study must follow three coordinates: biography, history and society. Mills believed that only through comparison, exhaustive use of historical documentation and by shifting perspectives can one become aware of the presence or absence of certain stages in the development of a society and understand its present. Rotariu, as well, argued that the past and the present are two sides of the same whole and that they must be equally known for one to understand both sociological and demographic problems.²

Among the ideas and principles that initially guided this study are those formulated by Urie Bronfenbrenner within the ecological systems theory³ and Glen Elder Jr. in the Life Course Theory⁴. Both authors emphasized that human development occurs in a specific historical location and time, and individuals operate as agents in their own right by choosing between the opportunities offered to them in the time and society in which they live. Both addressed the issue of change over time and recognized the impact of the historical and social context on the individual. The initial methodological choices were also influenced by the ideas of several French and Italian sociologists - Lahire⁵, Bertaux⁶ and Ferrarotti⁷. They favored narrative-biographical approaches and focused on studying socialization and individualization processes as being historically conditioned. They

¹ C. Wright Mills, *Imaginația sociologică* (București: Editura Politică, 1975).

² Traian Rotariu, *Studii demografice* (Iași: Polirom, 2010).

³ Urie Bronfenbrenner, “Developmental ecology through space and time: A future perspective” in *Examining lives in context: Perspectives on the ecology of human development*, ed. Phyllis Moen, Glenn H. Elder, Jr., and Kurt Luscher (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1995), 619–647, <https://doi.org/10.1037/10176-018>.

⁴ Glen H. Elder Jr., “The Life Course as Developmental Theory,” *Child Development* 69, no. 1 (1998): 1-12, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1132065>.

⁵ Bernard Lahire, *Dans les plis singuliers du social. Individuals, institutions, socialisations* (Paris: La Découverte, 2013, Ebook); Bernard Lahire, *Omni Plural. Către o sociologie psihologică* (Iași: Polirom, 2000).

⁶ Daniel Bertaux, *Le récit de vie*, 4th edition (Paris: Armand Colin, 2016, Ebook).

⁷ Franco Ferrarotti, *On the Science of Uncertainty: The Biographical Method in Social Research* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2003).

emphasized the need to restore the connections between social spaces and processes, on the one hand, and personal itineraries, on the other.

The ideas and positions expressed by the authors mentioned above had an essential role in the general strategy of approaching the research theme and the emphasis placed, at each stage and with each method used, on the temporal-historical dimension. However, this research was not based on a specific theoretical model or conceptual framework. Its exploratory approach included issues of terminology - in Romanian and other languages. The investigation of linguistic and lexical aspects related to this topic relied on the idea that many words used in everyday language and the concepts used by social researchers have historical roots and are culturally impregnated. Apart from that, in this thesis, the terms below were used with the following meanings:

- **celibatar(ă)** - (adj./n.) in the narrow sense, used in demography: (one who) never married;
- **celibat** - (n.) the fact or state of never having been married; [*never-marriedness*];
- **necăsătorit(ă)** - (adj.) never-married;
- **necăsătorie** - (n.) the fact or state of never having been married; [*never-marriedness*];
- **noncăsătorit(ă)** - (adj.) being never or no longer married (applicable to never-married, divorced and widowed individuals (equivalent to *single*, used in the legal sense); [*unmarried*];
- **noncoabitare** - (n.) the fact or state of not living with a partner; [*noncohabitation*];
- **nonmariaj** - (n.) the fact or state of never or no longer being legally married (used as an equivalent of the terms *singlehood* or *singleness*, in their legal sense); [*(legal) singlehood*];
- **nonparentalitate** - (n.) the fact or state of not having biological children; [*nonparenthood*];
- **monomenaj** - (n.) single person household.

Research methodology

This research used a sequential mixed method approach⁸. It combined qualitative and quantitative methods and techniques added based on the information collected in the previous stages. In the first stage, a secondary analysis of demographic statistical data and a series of life story interviews were carried out. While looking for particularities of Romanian culture, it was examined how a series of terms and concepts referring to unmarried individuals without partners have developed over time in four sociolinguistic spaces represented by the English, French, Polish and Romanian languages. The Romanian terms and phrases thus highlighted were used in the second stage to select the materials subjected to two content analyses. They had as sources the BCU Cluj Digital Library⁹ and the Toti Pentru Unu site (TPU. ro). The data derived from these analyses, as well as some aspects noted during the recruitment of interview participants, led to the need to

⁸ John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, 4th Ed. (SAGE, 2014).

⁹ "Lucian Blaga" Central University Library of Cluj-Napoca.

investigate perceptions and general opinions regarding unmarried people. Therefore, a content analysis of online discussions and an online questionnaire survey were carried out.

The secondary analysis of demographic data responded to the need to obtain an overall image of the Romanian dimensions of the phenomenon and the category represented by unmarried and childless adults, especially urban residents over 35 years of age. The data synthesized in this analysis served as a foundation for all the information subsequently collected through other methods.

Based on the previously-mentioned arguments about the need to broaden the temporal perspective in order to understand recent trends, the demographic analysis covered the period between the first modern census of the Romanian population in 1899 and the last statistical data available for each considered indicator. This period was divided into four time intervals corresponding to different political and demographic regimes: 1) the 19th century and the demography of “Little Romania”, 2) the interwar period until the communist regime came into power, 3) the communist regime and 4) the post-communist period.

The sources of information for this analysis included publications by Romanian and foreign researchers, statistical yearbooks and international reports. The data from the censuses carried out between 1899 and 2011 were processed further. This way, several issues rarely addressed until now were highlighted, namely the differences between urban and rural unmarried populations, the correlations between marital status, educational level and nonparenthood, and the sex ratio differences by residential location (urban/rural), age groups and marital status.

This chapter presents an image of noncohabitation and nonparenthood built on the available census data regarding people living in consensual unions and the number of children born to women over 15. It also addresses several issues related to migration and fertility. Both of them are phenomena that affect the sex ratios that, in turn, influence the dynamics of marriages and the size of the unmarried population. Since all interview participants (as well as the majority of respondents to the online survey) reside in the capital city, a more detailed examination of Bucharest’s sociodemographic context was considered useful and necessary. The role of education in marriage and couple formation was also emphasized. The information resulting from this analysis has contributed to answering several research questions, and it is presented in chapter III of this thesis.

The content analysis of the Digital Library of BCU Cluj completed the information regarding the use of words and expressions denoting unmarried individuals collected during the documentation stage. Several such terms and phrases, including their declensions and older spelling forms, served as keywords for searching the library’s digital database and selecting the texts that constituted the corpus of data for this analysis. These so-called “key terms” were the following: *becher*, *burlac*, *celibatar*, *domnișoară bătrână*, *fată bătrână*, *fătălău*, *flăcău/fecior/june bătrân*,

holtei, bărbat singur, femeie singură, persoană singură and persoană/femeie/bărbat necăsătorit(ă). The aim was to investigate the entire digital database of BCU Cluj (as it was at the end of 2021).

The selection of texts was carried out firstly through the Library's search engine and then manually to eliminate false answers given by the automatic search. The final corpus comprised 1816 texts published between 1860 and 2020 in 257 books and periodicals. The period of one and a half centuries reflecting the publication years of these texts was divided into four time intervals that coincide for the most part with those established in the analysis of the demographic context. These are: 1) the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century until the Great Union (1860 - 1918), 2) the interwar period until the end of the Second World War (1919 - 1945), 3) the communist period (1946 - 1989) and 4) the post-communist period (1990 - 2020). For each of the four periods, the number of texts in which every "key term" appeared was registered. Because the total number of digitized documents varied significantly among the four periods, the occurrences of each "key term" were also presented as percentages of the total number of digitized documents for the respective periods.

Furthermore, the content of each text in which a "key term" appeared was analyzed and included in a context category (literary, religious, humorous, sociopolitical, etc.). Fourteen such context categories were identified. In the case of the four terms with the highest frequency of occurrence - *burlac, holtei, celibatar* and *fată bătrână* - the number of occurrences in each context category and each of the four periods was also counted. No specialized software was used in this process. The coding and quantification were performed using a common spreadsheet program.

The content analysis of the TPU.ro website supplemented the information previously obtained, especially regarding the post-communist period. This analysis focused on 2009-2022 interval and a different communication environment represented by an online "community" or "network"-like platform where registered users interact through questions and answers. This site was chosen mainly because of its search engine. The same "key terms" as before, plus the English term *single*, were used in this analysis. *Single* has become used by Romanians - mainly within social media - with the meaning of "person without a partner". This content analysis focused on the quantitative dimension given by the number of each term occurrences (as provided by the site's search engine) but also on the meanings of the terms and the associations made by users.

The results of the content analysis described above have completed the answers to two of the research questions - regarding the particularities of Romanian society and the consequences of moving forward in life without a partner and children. They are presented in Chapter IV.

The content analysis of forum discussions used several online sources identified in the previous steps. Out of these, twelve discussions about never-married and single people were selected based on the relevance of the opening posts and the following ones. These discussions took

place between 2004-2021, on 4 forums: Desprecopii.ro, eLady.ro, RoPortal.ro and TPU.ro. Unlike the previous analysis that focused on the lexical-semantic aspects, this time the objective was to identify the themes that appeared in discussions initiated by users through open-ended comments or questions such as “What do you think about... [singles/ bachelors/ old girls/ people who don't want a relationship]?”.

The twelve materials that constituted the corpus of this analysis included posts by 197 registered participants (with distinct usernames), plus 12 anonymous posts (without usernames). Starting with the threads with the highest number of participants and discussing issues related to both sexes, several themes (categories) were identified. These were subsequently registered and counted in the other discussions, adding new ones when necessary. The information thus obtained completes the answer to the question regarding the consequences of getting older as an unmarried and partnerless (single) individual. Chapter V presents the results of this analysis.

The survey based on an online questionnaire was the last and the most time-limited data collection endeavor in this research. Its main objective was to quickly gather as much information as possible to complement and bring closer to the present the data previously collected through other methods. Conceived also as an exploration tool¹⁰, the questionnaire was addressed to people from all sociodemographic categories. It contained questions for all the respondents, but also some separate questions based on age and marital, relational and parental statuses. It represented an opportunity to test questions and possible answers for a future study on a more representative sample of participants.

Some questionnaire items sought to capture general attitudes and perceptions about never-married adults, childlessness and life outside marriage and coupledness. Several questions targeted unmarried people, regardless of their relationship and parental status. Other items were exclusively addressed to never-married, single (partnerless) and childless respondents. In addition, a section called “of the terminology” contained six questions addressed to all respondents. These questions referred to aspects related to the usage and meaning of several of the terms and phrases discussed and analyzed in the previous stages.

The group of respondents included 107 people with different marital statuses and aged 18 to more than 70. Among them, 32 people were never married. Out of the latter, 21 were not in a relationship at the time of the survey. The results from the “terminology” section were included in Chapter IV, dedicated to language issues. The answers to the rest of the items are presented and discussed in Chapter V.

The life story interviews were conducted in the first stage of the research. The information thus obtained, along with the observations derived from the participant recruitment process,

¹⁰ Jason Anderson and Amy Lightfoot, “Exploratory survey research” in *Research methods in language teaching and learning: a practical guide*, ed. Kenan Dikilitaş and Kate Reynolds, 182-199 (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2022).

influenced the subsequent choices, including the construction of the online questionnaire.

The selection criteria for the interview participants were as follows: people of both genders, over 35 years of age, heterosexuals, residents of the capital city, who have never been married, did not have children, did not cohabit and did not have a (stable) partner. The last criterion relied on self-identification. Bucharest was considered representative of the urban environment and the studied phenomenon as one of the cities with the highest mean age at first marriage in the country. The minimum eligibility age was chosen so as to exceed the mean age at first marriage for Bucharest residents of both genders, provided by the National Institute of Statistics for 2016.

The selection of participants was designed to be carried out by “snowball method” and “relay informants”.¹¹ The interview locations were established according to the preferences of the interviewees, at their homes or in another space that was familiar enough and suitable for a private discussion. The individual interviews were initially designed to be conducted in two sessions of 1-1.5 hours each, but most participants expressed their time availability and preference for one-session interviews. In the end, with two exceptions that followed the original plan, most interviews were conducted in one session that lasted between 2 and 3.5 hours. They were recorded and transcribed. Each interviewee signed a Participation Agreement and chose a pseudonym under which the information they provided was collected and processed.

The interviews were organized based on a model proposed by McAdams¹² in which the participants are asked to think of their life as a book or novel that would contain chapters, main and secondary characters, happenings and events. This model proved useful given that milestones of adulthood, such as marriage and the birth of children, were absent in these cases. The initial directions constituted the main directive intervention of the author-interviewer. During the interview, only clarifying questions (of some data, events or actions of the characters) were asked. The present study includes 12 life stories with nine women aged between 38 and 57 years and three men aged 36, 41 and 50 as “authors”. They all have tertiary education, and seven of them also have postgraduate education.

The biographical narratives collected during the interviews captured the phenomenon of life outside marriage without a partner and children from the interviewees’ perspective. They responded to Mills’s imperative to include the biographical component in studying a social phenomenon and to analyze the relationship between intimate contexts of life and wider social frameworks. The information collected through interviews completes the answers to the questions regarding the circumstances that lead individuals toward their marital, relationship and parental status and the

¹¹ Florentina Scârnci, *Îndrumar de cercetare calitativă în științele socio-umane* (Editura Universității Transilvania, Brașov, 2006), 104.

¹² Dan P. McAdams, *The life story interview -II*. Revised 2007, The Foley Center for the Study of Lives, Northwestern University, <https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/sites.northwestern.edu/dist/4/3901/files/2020/11/The-Life-Story-Interview-II-2007.pdf>.

consequences of the latter. Although the interviews were conducted at the beginning of the research, both the description of the method and the presentation of the results were left at the end.

During the course of this research, each methodological step was preceded (and followed) by a return to theoretical documentation. The structure of this thesis reflects the successive transitions from theory to data collection and the attempt to understand the phenomenon studied on several levels. This understanding starts from the global context to the national or local one and, finally, the personal level, all of them viewed through the lens of temporal developments and the interconnections between these levels.

The content of the thesis and research results

The theoretical premises and research methodology, presented in the previous pages, are included in Chapter I of the thesis. Chapter II, entitled “Historical and contemporary dimensions of life outside of marriage (global and national perspectives)”, offers some historical landmarks considered useful and necessary to better understand the complexity of the factors involved in the evolution of (legal) singlehood. When we look back in history, most of the available data, where it could be reconstructed, concerns marriage. This chapter mainly refers to legal unions, marriage and the lack of it, that is, to (legal) singlehood and never-marriedness in different areas of the world.

The works of social history, urban history and especially women's history, published in the last decades, shed new light on both the idea of the universality of marriage and the life outside of it in different cultures and eras. Several factors such as urbanization, industrialization, women's access to education and the labor market were found to generally correlate with the postponement of marriage and the increase in the number of never-married individuals. A careful analysis of the sociocultural particularities of different societies can highlight some significant differences between them (for example, between the so-called individualistic and familistic societies). When new variables are taken into account, such as class, race or religious affiliation, the differences between segments of the same society or between countries of the same region can be highlighted. Europe is far from being uniform in terms of marital behavior. Countries like Great Britain, France or Germany have a long history of never-marriedness, especially among women. In the history of the United States, depending on the period and location, one can talk about both female and male never-marriedness, but also significant variations along the lines of class and race.

Recent demographic studies have painted the image of singlehood and never-marriedness as widespread phenomena. They are present not only in Europe and the United States but also in East and Southeast Asia, South America, the Middle East, and even Africa. In many of these latter societies, living outside marriage, especially as a woman, is usually perceived as a break from the

past and a major challenge to local cultures and traditional family relationships.¹³ However, it must be said that the rarity of singlehood refers especially to late marriage and never-marriedness, since premodern Asian societies - Japan, (Islamic) Southeast Asia, the Middle East or the Ottoman Empire - had high divorce rates, higher than today and significantly higher than in premodern Western societies.¹⁴

Social researchers who studied the changes in social and demographic behaviors outside the European and North American space have argued that when these phenomena are studied the entire local social texture must be taken into account, including aspects such as gender relations, family ties, specific cultural norms and values.¹⁵ It has been shown that some societies, such as the Arab ones, tend to negotiate these new realities in a social framework where the notion of self does not conform to the Western constructs of independence, separation and autonomy of the individual.¹⁶ In this chapter, the (abbreviated) description of some sociodemographic developments in societies beyond the European and North American space represents an attempt, however limited, to avoid the Eurocentrism that generally characterizes social science research and discourse.

In the case of Romania, whose psycho-cultural profile is significantly different from that of the Western world¹⁷, the comparison with societies outside this space is more than useful - it sometimes proves necessary. It is important to emphasize that all the modernization projects of Romania, including the communist ones and regardless of their outcome, were based on the idea of national emancipation from foreign domination, on the protection and development of the Romanian nation and not on the freedom and autonomy of the individual, nor on the liberation from the interference of religion.¹⁸

Although, more recently, Romanian historians have begun to study topics less addressed in the past regime, such as mentalities and morals, religion, sexuality, couple and family, hardly anything has been written about never-married individuals. Those who have studied women's history have managed to capture only fragments of their existence outside of marriage. Most historical documents provide information related to widows, divorcees and orphans.¹⁹ Romanian

¹³ Gavin W. Jones, "The «Flight From Marriage» in South-East and East Asia", *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 36, no. 1 (2005): 93-119, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41603982>.

¹⁴ Yossef Rapoport, *Marriage, Money and Divorce in Medieval Islamic Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹⁵ Hoda Rashad, "The tempo and intensity of marriage in the Arab region: Key challenges and their implications", *DIFI Family Research and Proceedings* 2015, no. 1 (April 2015), <https://doi.org/10.5339/difi.2015.2>.

¹⁶ Rashad, "The tempo and intensity".

¹⁷ Daniel David, *Psihologia Poporului Român: profilul psihologic al românilor într-o monografie cognitiv experimentală* (Iași: Polirom, 2015).

¹⁸ Paul Blokker, *Modernity and its varieties: A historical sociological analysis of the Romanian modern experience* (Ph.D. Thesis, European University Institute, Department of Political and Social Sciences, Florence, May 2004), 321.

¹⁹ Dan Horia Mazilu, *Văduvele sau despre istorie la feminin* (Iași: Polirom, 2008); Nicoleta Roman, *Deznădăjduită muiere n-au fost ca mine. Femei, onoare și păcat în Valahia secolului al XIX-lea* (București: Humanitas, 2016); Constanța Vintilă-Ghițulescu, *Focul Amurului. Despre dragoste și sexualitate în societatea românească (1750-1830)* (București: Humanitas, 2006).

historians have also shown that in the 19th century, quite many noblemen's daughters lived as nuns in the monasteries of Moldavia and Wallachia.²⁰ History also presents the image of prostitutes who, during the same century, came to the attention of state officials, especially in urban areas, and became the subject of special regulations. The latter included in the category of “public women” any unmarried woman who did not provide proof of male guardianship.²¹ On the other hand, the rural world operated largely on traditions and under the control of the Church. According to Marian, there were “lots of boys” and “lots of girls” who did not get married “at all”²², and those who remained unmarried were the target of mockery, especially in folk songs and shouts.

Both before and after the Great Union, the dominant discourse was one of fighting the tendency for people to elude marriage. After 1918, the concerns related to heredity and the health of the Romanian race grew, similarly to other European states and the United States, leading to a eugenic culture. Specialists in medical and social sciences argued in favor of taking decisive measures to improve the health of the Romanians and the biological strength of the nation. Using the language of science and the label of objectivity, the eugenicists fought against liberal ideas and principles by arguing that it is irresponsible to promote the autonomy of the individual, ignore the hereditary factors that condition his actions or allow a mediocrity to define the destiny of the nation by freely choosing their marital partners.²³ The ideas and measures that aimed at the need to make the state responsible for the health of the nation were accompanied by the idea of preserving ethnic purity, exercising a firm control over the individual's actions and limiting his choices, especially with regard to marriage and reproduction. Some eugenicists sought to limit the power of women - who had been labeled as dysgenic agents - and define them exclusively as wives and mothers, but also to make men more socially responsible by legally restricting their marital options.²⁴

The coming into power of the communist regime brought, among other things, the (re)election of woman as one of the main targets of the new modernization project. Equality between the sexes was pursued through women's mass involvement in the production process and the state taking over some domestic tasks. Abolition of the patriarchal family, liberation of marriages from economic constraints and freedom of individuals to choose their life partners according to their own affinities were proclaimed. Through a massive increase in access to education and jobs, the younger generation gained relative independence from their families of origin. Family formation and

²⁰ Elena Olariu, “Statutul femeii la mijlocul veacului al XIX-lea” în *Despre femei și istoria lor*, ed. Alin Ciupală (București: Editura Universității din București, 2004), 33.

²¹ Lucian Dumitru Dăramuș, “Les femmes sans mari des classes populaires, des prostituées? Administrative arbitration et resistances des femmes (Bucharest, 1850-1870),” *Genre & Histoire*, no. 16 (2015), <http://journals.openedition.org/genrehistoire/2227> .

²² Simion Florea Marian, *Nunta la români. Studiu istoric-etnografic comparativ* (București: Tipografia Carol Göbl, 1890), 10-15.

²³ Maria Bucur, *Eugenics and Modernization in Interwar Romania* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002).

²⁴ For example, the Penal Code of 1938 prohibited Romanian officers from inter-ethnic marriages. Bucur, *Eugenics and Modernization*.

dissolution became a state problem solved through a complex system of rewards and penalties. The single, unattached individual had no place in the fabric of the “New Man” who was to build the communist future.

The communist regime gave women considerable economic independence from men but sought to suppress the ability of individuals of both genders to act as autonomous citizens.²⁵ The same communist regime offered numerous social benefits - maternity leave, childcare support, pensions, etc. - thus making it possible for women to work and have professional careers. However, the profession remains a secondary aspect of the Romanian woman's identity, the role of the mother being more significant than any other, and children remaining “the most beautiful accomplishment of [one’s] life”²⁶.

The fall of communism led to the reevaluation of all the institutions of the previous regime. Marriage, married life and family were freed from the state’s control but also from a substantial part of the support previously provided. Maternity has been “destatized”. The new economic, social and technological developments have produced significant changes in Romanian society. The “model family” split into several new models but remained the focus of general concerns. Marriage and parenthood remain two essential milestones in an individual's life. The lack of them is likely to invalidate, at the level of individual and collective perceptions, the entire life of a person.

Romanians’ propensity for marriage and family emphasized by Romanian demographers can also be seen as an effect of continuous policies and actions that limited personal freedom and individual autonomy. From a certain point of view, the lack of focus on the individual as an independent entity and the lack of studies on single people represent a differentiating factor from other countries. Beyond this, the specific elements of the Romanian space are related to history, successive modernization attempts and the sociodemographic structure of the population.

Chapter III, entitled “The Romanian demographic context. The partial statistical (in)visibility of never-married people without a partner and children”, sought to build a “demographic background”²⁷ (as wide as possible) on which the information collected through different methods used in this study to be later “projected”. The information presented in this chapter completes the answers to two research questions. One is related to the peculiarities of the Romanian space regarding life outside of marriage, without a partner and children. The other refers to the sociodemographic profile of the urban never-married individuals who do not cohabit and do not have children. In this chapter, the data analyzed and discussed refer to the population inside the Romanian state borders as they were at one historical moment or another. That included migrations,

²⁵ Maria Bucur and Mihaela Miroiu, *Birth of Democratic Citizenship: Women and Power in Modern Romania* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018).

²⁶ Bucur and Miroiu, *Birth of Democratic Citizenship*, 63-78 .

²⁷ Rotariu, *Studii demografice* , 8.

which were referred to only to the extent they influenced the total number of male and female (national and local) residents.

Historical demography shows that Romania has always presented certain characteristics in terms of marital behavior that separate it from most European countries, especially Western European ones. Romanians married earlier than other Europeans, and very few remained unmarried all their lives. These behaviors define the so-called Eastern European marriage pattern²⁸ and reflect the peasant character of the Romanian society.²⁹ Even today, Romania remains one of the European countries with the lowest proportions of an urban and tertiary educated population, two aspects of great importance in the context of this research.

“Little Romania” was one of the few European countries that entered the 20th century with a predominantly male population and as a country of immigration.³⁰ This gender structure was influential in maintaining high marriage rates and low percentages of never-married women. In the 1899 census, never-married men outnumbered never-married women within all age groups. Although the two World Wars forever changed the ratio between the two genders, including the marriageable population, the numerical imbalance produced by the losses of the male population and its effects on the total share of never-married women were less conspicuous than in other former belligerent countries. However, the 1956, 1966 and 1977 censuses indicated higher proportions of “celibat definitiv”³¹ [permanent (legal) singlehood] among women than among men. The social, political and legislative context of the communist period contributed to the delay in changing marital and reproductive behaviors that happened in other cultural-political spaces of the world. The communist regime’s demographic and social policies overlapped quite well with the peasant model. In Romania and other Central and Eastern European countries, postponing marriage and the birth of the first child started to become visible and significant immediately after the fall of the communist regimes.

After 1990, the sex ratio of the never-married population around the age of 50 [“celibatari definitivi”] changed again, the subsequent censuses showing more men than women who never married. They also showed a distancing of urban areas from rural ones in terms of age at first marriage, especially of women, as well as a differentiation between men and women regarding the percentages of individuals around the age of 50 who never married which were higher for rural men and urban women. Nonmarital cohabitation is more widespread in rural areas, especially when women are concerned, with never-married urban women being much less involved in consensual

²⁸ John Hajnal, “European Marriage Patterns in Perspective” in *Population in history: essays in historical demography*, ed. DV Glass and DE Eversley (Publishing Company, 1965): 101-143.

²⁹ Vladimir Trebici, “Model demografic național și submodele regionale,” *Viitorul social* LXXVII (Jan.-Feb. 1984):49-57.

³⁰ Leonida Colescu, *Analiza rezultatelor recensământului general al populației României dela 1899*, Tabelul nr. 8 (București: Institutul Central de Statistică, 1944 , http://omeka.bjc.ro/omeka/files/original/23/1264/BJAman_T_II_3.030.1.pdf)

³¹Conventionally measured around the age of 50.

unions than the rural ones. On the other hand, urban men aged over 35 are involved in consensual unions in higher proportions than urban women. Nonparenthood is also higher for women with tertiary education and high professional status. Women's level of education appears as a relevant factor for both never-marriedness and nonparenthood, the relation between the latter two being strengthened by the fact that, for most Romanians, being in a couple, marital or nonmarital, still constitutes a precondition for giving birth to a child.

It is also important to emphasize that the major social anxieties manifested in Romanian society in recent decades regarding the decrease in the birth rate were not directly related to never-married people.³² This is due not so much to a relatively low percentage of the never-married population, as to the fact that Romanian nuptiality and birth rates only partially overlap. More than a third of all births in Romania occur outside of marriage, nonmarital births being relatively socially accepted. Likewise, the dramatic decrease in fertility occurred mainly due to the decrease in the number of children born to a Romanian woman and much less due to an increase in the number of women who did not give birth to any children, regardless of their marital status.

During the '80s and '90s, Romania faced a "*marriage squeeze*"³³ phenomenon generated by the birth rate explosion following the 1966 "anti-abortion" decree - a phenomenon largely alleviated by the changes in marriage preferences, mainly those related to the age of the partners. In the last years, the reversal of the educational gender gap is likely to generate a similar phenomenon among highly educated women. The available data so far show that Romanian women have been much less "flexible" than other European women regarding the education level of their partners, rarely forming couples with less educated men.³⁴ There is currently insufficient information to analyze possible differences between the formation of marital and nonmarital couples.

The data presented in this chapter suggest that the "uncoupled adults" who constitute the final focus of this study - that is, urban, middle-aged and older, never-married individuals without a partner and children - are predominantly women with higher education and professional careers. In Bucharest, this profile has even stronger accents, given that the capital city is the largest urban and university center in the country and, of all Romanian counties, it has the lowest masculinity ratios in almost all adult age groups. The capital city probably has also the highest concentration of highly educated women with enough resources to afford to be selective in choosing partners. However, this selectivity comes amid a significant numerical shortage of potential partners.

³²As it happens, for example, in Japan.

³³ The pressure on marriages exerted by the "excess" of the marriageable population of one gender and the "deficit" of the other. In communist Romania, the birth rate explosion of the late '60s generated a surplus of female population.

³⁴ Table A2 in Martin Klesment and Jan Van Bavel, "The Reversal of the Gender Gap in Education, Motherhood, and Women as Main Earners in Europe," *European Sociological Review* 33, no.3 (2017): 465–481, <https://doi.org/10.1093/esr/jcw063> .

Understanding the phenomena of never-marriedness, noncohabitation and nonparenthood within certain categories of population, in all the complexity of their interactions, requires analyses that go beyond the data aggregated at the national level or by urban-rural areas and target the so-called local marriage markets. That means making more transparent and available the censuses data and using additional ways of aggregating and disseminating information related to the civil status of the Romanians at the level of all administrative-territorial units. Unlike other countries, in Romania, the National Institute of Statistics and other research entities rarely include marital status information in their reports. In Romania, marital status data is systematically collected only during decennial censuses, as no microcensuses are carried out more frequently. Moreover, when the structure of the population by marital status is reported, most of the time it does not include the age groups, thus not making a clear difference between minors and those over the legal age of marriage. This statistical way of treating never-married adults is reminiscent of the mentalities of past centuries. It also contributes to the partial (in)visibility of never-married adults and, implicitly, to the absence of this topic from the general and academic discourse.

The limits of the analysis of demographic data in this chapter are related not only to what type of data is gathered, aggregated and published, or not, in Romania but also to the problems regarding the way the demographic information is collected, especially during censuses. The data-gathering processes of the latter have generated many doubts regarding the accuracy of some officially published data. Nevertheless, any study that includes such information can only use it the way it is provided by the competent official institutions.

This chapter responds to several research objectives but also presents data and information that could constitute a starting point for future studies focused on one or more of the aspects and phenomena mentioned in these pages.

Chapter IV, entitled “Linguistic and lexical spaces of life outside of marriage and couple”, has developed starting from the initial documentation process that emphasized the need to constantly clarify the meanings of the terms and concepts used in translation between various languages, but also by different speakers of the same language. The chapter includes the results of two content analyses (of the BCU Cluj Digital Library and the TPU.ro website) and the results of the “terminology” section of the online survey. The information presented in this chapter is mainly related to the first objective of the research and answers the question regarding the specific elements of the Romanian space in terms of life outside marriage, without a partner and children.

In order to understand the phenomenon of never-marriedness (or never-married singlehood) in Romania, it was considered useful and necessary to analyze some aspects related to specific terms and concepts, including the context of their formation and evolution over time. Comparisons with other sociolinguistic spaces, namely English, French and Polish, were made. This approach allows a

critical account of both (possible) Romanian linguistic reflexes and the conceptual Anglocentrism that is difficult to avoid in today's academic world. The English language reflects not only developments within the Anglo-American space but also in the global academic space. French represents the language and culture that exerted a major influence on Romanian society a century and a half ago, one of the main terms discussed in this chapter - *celibatar* - being imported from French. The Polish example shows how elements of public discourse can shape social scientists' concerns and academic discourse. It also shows how the “domestication” of terms/concepts imported from another language can reconfigure their semantic boundaries and redefine the categories they designate. In addition, Poland and Romania share a communist past that proved to be relevant when considering marital behaviors, both before and after the fall of their communist regimes.

The exploration of a so-called Romanian lexicon of never-marriedness started from the “entries” in Romanian dictionaries, the data offered by the Romanian Linguistic Atlas (ALR)³⁵, and an observation made by Zafiu³⁶ about some peculiarities of the Romanian language related to the terms that designate never-married women and men. The latter refers to the fact that these terms present a “symmetry” of pejorative connotations for the two genders, while the number of terms designating the never-married man is greater than those referring to the never-married woman.

In many languages, the lexicon related to never-married people, with or without partners, has been enriched in recent decades with new terms and meanings reflecting demographic, social and ideological developments in the respective societies. In contrast, in Romanian, the terms denoting never-married and single individuals have remained mostly the same throughout the last two centuries. The only changes noted are related to a higher or lesser frequency of use of some of them in different periods and to some semantic extensions.

If the lexicon of a language reflects the concerns and interests of the society in which that language is spoken, it could be said that the data presented in this chapter indicate a rather moderate interest in contemporary Romanian society with regard to the subject of never-married and single individuals. However, that seems insufficient to attract the social researchers' attention or stimulate new lexical imports or innovations, as it happened in other sociolinguistic spaces. An example of the latter is how the term *single* (without a partner/living alone) has become established in the Polish academic language by replacing *samotna* (alone) which remains used in collocations and with meanings related to the need for help and assistance.

Looking at how the terms referred to here as “key terms” have been used over the last few centuries, this study found that during the communist period, unlike the interwar one, they appeared

³⁵ *Atlasul lingvistic român. Partea I-II, Vol. [I-V]* (Cluj: Muzeul Limbii Române, 1938-1943).

³⁶ Rodica Zafiu, “Burlăcița,” *Dilema veche*, nr. 570 (15-21 Jan. 2015), <https://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/tilc-show/articol/burlacita>.

much less often (if at all) in publications. That is tantamount to the category of never-marrieds entering a cone of social shadow. It reflects, to a large extent, the communist collectivist ideology in which elements of individual identity such as ethnicity or marital status appeared less relevant. This discursive absence contrasts sharply with the interwar period when nationalist and eugenic discourses focused, to a large extent, on never-married individuals, mostly urban ethnic Romanians, whose (non)marital and (non)reproductive behaviors were seen as undermining the future of the nation and the Romanian state. The interwar period was one of maximum visibility of never-married individuals, especially from the urban areas, a negative visibility that served a stigmatizing role. The fact that all the terms used before 1946 reappear in the post-communist public discourse - including the publicistic one - suggests a continuity of their use in everyday language.

Celibatar, *burlac* and *holtei* have remained synonymous terms. *Holtei* is much less frequently used today than the first two. The never-married status remains the main element of their definition, even though *burlac* and *celibatar* are now also used with an extended meaning that includes all individuals without partners, regardless of their marital status, but also in a restricted sense to individuals who have never been married and have no partner, and possibly no children.

Burlac appears frequently in written language over the last 160 years. In the last two decades, this term has improved semantically, especially due to reality TV shows. The latter have created - for both *burlaci* [*bachelors*] and *burlăcițe* [*bachelorettes*] - the image of young, desirable characters, whose love life is resolved by choosing a partner from a crowd of suitors.

Celibatar(ă) remains used in demographic literature as the equivalent of the phrase *persoană necăsătorită* [never-married person], regardless of age, sex or cohabitation status. Although the feminine *celibatară* is frequently used in publications and everyday speech, there is nevertheless a greater association of this term with the masculine gender. Therefore, the usage note in Romanian dictionaries - “especially male” - is still valid. It stands for a historical association in the context of “Little Romania” whose never-married population was predominantly male, as well as of “Greater Romania” characterized by the intensification of public debates on the subject of (Catholic) celibate priests and the discursive and administrative-fiscal focus on never-married and childless men. Although throughout the communist period the proportion of potentially “permanent” never-married women was consistently higher than that of their male counterparts, the almost total absence of this topic from public discourse made these changes go almost unnoticed and without consequences at the lexical and semantic level.

Expressions that one might think are out of date, such as *fată bătrână* [*old maid*] or *domnișoară bătrână* [*old Miss*], have now, in fact, only a narrower range of use, limited to certain contexts. If at the beginning of the 20th century, *fată bătrână* was used both ironically, pejoratively

and purely descriptively, nowadays, it is used only in a derogatory sense and to evoke a metaphorically negative image. This collocation can be found in literary language, including in some recent titles, but also in articles on political or economic topics in which its metaphorical meaning is exploited and the pejorative connotation is reinforced. In the last 20 years, the label of *fată bătrână* has been attached to several public figures and economic entities to express redundancy or lack of political, social or economic attractiveness. The expression and image of the “fată bătrână” were also conveyed through traditional songs collected and included in several folk singers’ repertoires. In recent years, *fata bătrână* has also been a topic of some online discussions. The tabloid press used this phrase as “clickbait” - to attract more audience - even when referring to both never-married and divorced female figures. Even though - or precisely because - it sounds like an outdated expression and has an obvious pejorative meaning, *fată bătrână* continues to be used in contemporary everyday language, much more frequently than one might think.

In recent years, Romanians have begun to use the English term *single* to designate uncoupled individuals. The term itself was imported several decades ago and has been used since the ’70s with meanings related to music and tourism. Its use in reference to marital and relationship status is relatively recent and generally limited to informal settings, the Internet and social media platforms. The phrase *persoane single* [*single persons*] is preferred by organizers of events dedicated to single people. *Single* was also chosen by most respondents to the online questionnaire as the most appropriate term to designate a never-married and childless person over 35.

The phrases *femei singure*, *bărbați singuri*, *persoane singure* [*women/men/persons alone*], used until 1946 mainly to express the physical, situational absence of any accompanying person, are now also used in a sense similar to the English expressions *single women/men/persons*, that is, individuals without romantic partners. However, the adjective *singur(ă)* has a history of lexical associations closer to *seul/~e* in French and *samotna* in Polish than to *single*. Thus, the syntagm *persoane singure* frequently occurs in legal-administrative discourse (“familii și persoane singure”³⁷ [families and persons (living) alone]) and evokes a situation of deficit and the need for financial support. The expressions *femei singure* and *bărbați singuri* are found in the language of social media, the dating industry and psychotherapy, where the existence of a relational deficit and the need to “un-aloneing/un-singling” is implicitly suggested. In the online survey carried out in this study, the number of respondents who used the adjective or phrase (*persoană*) *singur(ă)* to denote a never-married and childless adult was half that of those who chose *single*.

Due to the uses and associations described above, the phrases *bărbat/femeie/persoană singur(ă)* carry different baggage of meanings from that of *bărbat/femeie/persoană necăsătorit(ă)*.

³⁷ See, for example, Law no. 67/24 June 1995 regarding social assistance or Law no. 416/18 July 2001 regarding **the** guaranteed minimum income.

The latter have rather a descriptive character and refer exclusively to marital status. In Romanian dictionaries, the adjective *singur(ă)* remains explained as: “not accompanied by others, without any companion”; “lonely”; “solitary, isolated”; “by his own forces, without anyone's help, intervention, prompting, approval”; “only one, unique” or (adverbial) “just, only”. Direct references to relational status are missing. As for the terms *celibat* [*never-marriedness*] and *singurătate* [*aloneness/loneliness*], which are usually used when translating *singlehood* from English, they are not equivalent to each other. Several French researchers³⁸ argued that in French, despite the frequent use of the term *célibat* in a broader meaning than that of the state of never being married, in fact, there is no equivalent for *singlehood*, namely a noun expressing the state of not having a partner. Following their arguments, the same can be said about the Romanian language.

The presentation in this chapter of some lexical and semantic developments in several cultural-linguistic spaces is intended to underline the need to pay special attention to the meanings of the terms used in translation, including in demographic papers and reports. When comparing *single* population and *necăsătorită* [*never-married*] population from different countries, one must consider the areas of meaning and the boundaries of the categories designated by those terms, as established by local data collection and reporting practices.

Chapter V is entitled “Perceptions, attitudes and experiences regarding people and life outside marriage, without a partner and children”. Its theme was outlined starting from the results of the two content analyses mentioned before and the observations made during the recruitment of the interview participants. Tracking the usage of the “key terms” over the past two centuries has revealed the persistence of negative perceptions and attitudes towards unmarried individuals over time, with a peak of stigmatizing discourse during the interwar period. On the other hand, the recruitment of interview participants encountered what might be called “rolling resistance”, in the sense that refusals of involvement, both from people who met the interview criteria and potential contact persons, significantly outnumbered the positive responses.

Negative perceptions related to never-married and single individuals have been studied by American researchers and analyzed as stereotypes and prejudices since the second half of the 20th century.³⁹ In his seminal work on stigma, Goffman listed unmarried urbanites - as well as those married but without children - among the “peripheral instances” of social deviance.⁴⁰ As the social and demographic changes that have led to a rise in the number of unmarried, unpartnered and single-living people have taken on global dimensions, the number of studies on the stereotyping, stigmatization and discrimination of these categories, especially of women, has increased

³⁸ Marie Bergström, Françoise Courtel and Géraldine Vivier, “La vie hors couple, une vie hors norme? Expériences du célibat dans la France contemporaine,” *Population* 74, no.1-2 (2019): 103-130, <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-02264642>.

³⁹ See, for example, Dorothy Y. Deegan (1951/1969) apud Leonard Cargan and Matthew Melko, *Singles: Myths and Realities* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1982).

⁴⁰ Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 144.

exponentially. In the 8th and 9th decades of the last century, social researchers also began to study stigma and stereotypes related to people without children, including infertile couples, voluntary childless couples and childless single women.

This research did not explicitly aim at studying stereotypes and stigmas of the never-married, single and childless individuals. However, the data gathered during the course of it made these issues relevant in the context of formulating the answer to the question regarding the consequences of this marital, relational and parental status. It has thus become necessary to review the concepts and theories developed by social researchers who have studied this issue. The results of this review made up a general framework for interpreting the data obtained from the content analysis of online discussions and the survey based on an online questionnaire.

During the research, it became apparent that almost all the attributes describing the “uncoupled adults” targeted by this research (never-married, without partners, without children, aged 35 and older) have stigmatizing potential. When considered separately, their discrediting potential can be assessed as more or less strong. However, taken together and adding the female gender (as there are more never-married women over the age of 35 than men in urban areas, especially the capital city), these attributes are mutually reinforcing, in a negative way, accentuating the “deficit” and increasing the risk of social devaluation.

Some people who were asked to recommend eligible participants for interviews hinted that the individuals with all the above attributes are at least “strange” if not a bit “crazy”. The analysis of online discussions and, to some extent, the responses to the online questionnaire confirmed the existence of these negative perceptions. The data presented in this chapter show that, indeed, in the Romanian society, too, one can notice, in Kaufmann's terms, an “accusing finger”⁴¹ directed at these people, as an indicator of abnormality. The “accusations” that a century ago appeared in publications under more or less illustrious signatures are now found under the veil of anonymity in mediums such as online forums. Apart from that, there are many “clichés” hidden under ironies, but also, often, silence.

As discreditable individuals, the never-married, single and childless persons can limit the effects of stigmas by developing strategies to control the discrediting information. That is what some potential interviewees did during the recruitment stage by hiding the information regarding their eligibility or invoking reasons that canceled at least one of the eligibility attributes (place of residence, lack of a partner, etc.). The online survey showed that at least some of the never-married, uncoupled and childless respondents usually avoid talking about these aspects of their identity with people who do not already have this information.

The analysis of the sociopolitical history of Romania and the use of language regarding never-

⁴¹ Jean-Claude Kaufmann, *Femeia singură și Făt-Frumos*, trad. Dana Ligia Ilin (București: Humanitas, 2008), 54.

married individuals over time highlighted the “stable center”⁴² of the old stereotypes related to this category of people. These stereotypes are rooted in Romanian culture and society - predominantly rural (until recently), orthodox and familist-collectivist. At the beginning of the third millennium, the ideas that people without a family and especially those without children are “unfulfilled”, never-married women past their prime “are no longer useful in any way”, and men without a wife and children “will not leave anything behind” and “they will die alone” are still very much alive.

The analyses presented in this chapter, as well as those previously presented, showed the persistence in today’s everyday language of *fată bătrână* and how the use of it contributes to the process of categorization and transmission of negative social representations related to women over 30-35 years old who have never been married, have no children and no partner. The connotation of virginity has been almost entirely lost, but where that is implied, it has additional stigmatizing potential. In the case of women, the significance of age is greater and the deviation from the “normal” sequence of life events and the collective calendar, even in its modern and more flexible variants, is much more closely observed and emphasized.

Even though the data obtained from the content analysis and the online survey are not statistically representative, they suggest that marriage and parenthood are losing their compulsory character. Despite that, entering (and passing) the fourth decade of life as a never-married and childless individual still produces bewilderment and curiosity, and the tendency to look for reasons related to individual deficiencies is preserved.

The online survey showed that in urban areas, never-married childless adults over 35 (especially women) are not at all rarities. Almost all respondents admitted that they have at least one relative, friend or other acquaintance with this status, and a fifth of them know more than five such persons.

The online discussions and the questionnaire responses have also highlighted the peripheral areas of the stereotypes related to singleness and nonparenthood, namely the fluid, flexible zones where old prejudices fade, undergo changes and allow the infusion of concepts such as “personal choice”, “freedom” or “independence”. However, they are not accepted unconditionally either. The individual’s choices must be aimed at personal happiness, and the failure to achieve that must be borne solely by the person who made that “choice”.

Although the concept of couple no longer totally overlaps with that of a married couple, being in a couple still appears as the main differentiating factor. Being in a couple, namely a sexual partnership, has become more important than being married or having children. That constitutes a

⁴² Knights argued that stereotypes are complex cultural entities that have a stable core and fluid, malleable, context-responsive peripheral areas. Mark Knights, “Historical stereotypes and histories of stereotype” in *Psychology and history: interdisciplinary explorations*, ed. Cristian Tileagă and Jovan Byford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 242-267.

new individual imperative. The online posts have also highlighted the so-called “compulsory sexuality”. Those who do not want or feel the need for a romantic relationship “are not quite in their right mind”, and men who want a sexual partnership without much success in doing so are pitied and despised.

In the case of highly educated women with high socioeconomic status, the failure to fulfill the imperative of forming a couple is often explained by their so-called “exaggerated demands”. This reason is less often given when men are considered, their (legal) singlehood being mainly attributed to avoidance of responsibilities and sexual libertinism. The stereotypical image of the highly selective woman is becoming stronger and seems to be partly internalized by those concerned. However, the online survey has shown that these women generally want a partner equal to them in terms of age, socioeconomic level and education. In other words, one is looking for a homogamous partner, homogamy being exactly what most Romanian marriages have been based on in the last several decades.

Drawing a conclusion on the consensus or degree of acceptance of negative stereotypes regarding never-married, single and childless Romanians of a certain age calls for future investigation that ensures a greater degree of representativeness. From this research, it might be inferred, however, that the acceptance of the “truth” of these negative perceptions is influenced by the fact that, in Romania, unlike other parts of the world, there has been no deliberate and committed effort to challenge them. Entering and remaining in a historically and almost universally stereotyped and stigmatized social category is one of the most significant consequences of growing older as a never-married, single and childless person.

Chapter VI, entitled “Celibacy and nonparenthood, in ‘singular folds’”, presents the results of life story interviews. The narrative-biographical component of this study completes Mills’s history-society-biography triad. In the previous chapters, the “unfolded” social, in Lahire's terms, has been sought. That is, the transindividual realities represented by historical, sociocultural and demographic contexts. This last chapter presents the realities of several individual actors representing the social in its “folded, individualized state”.

As previously mentioned, the life story interviews were carried out in the first phase of the research. The information thus gathered contributed to some methodological choices made in the subsequent stages. This included the construction of several items in the online questionnaire. However, placing this chapter at the end of the thesis reflects the logic of presenting (and understanding) the subject under investigation from a very broad context to individual dimensions. This approach followed the research objective of exploring the experiences of urban, uncoupled, childless, never-married adults aged over 35.

Although the life stories of the interview participants do not represent “illustrative” or

“typical” cases, as Lahire said, these singular experiences are not necessarily “unrepeatable” or “unique”⁴³. The information gathered in the interviews showed the different circumstances that led the interviewees on biographical paths outside marriage toward their present status. The term “circumstances” - and not “reasons” - of never-marriedness and nonparenthood was chosen here mainly to emphasize the idea that in the biographical development of individuals, generally, one cannot speak of direct causal relationships that are not mediated by a multitude of interactions and contexts (historical, socioeconomic, institutional, family, interpersonal, etc.). The latter act both from outside and inside the individual, through their integration into his or her cognitive-emotional architecture, thus influencing various choices made throughout life.

In this chapter, special attention was paid to describing the family and interpersonal- affective contexts, namely the primary socialization circumstances of the interviewees and the significant persons in their lives. From the participants’ accounts, it is clear that a large part of their views and attitudes toward marriage, coupledom and children are based on their childhood experiences. Coincidentally or not (this being a topic to be investigated in the future), in the case of those interviewed, the couple relations between parents (and sometimes family relations in general) tended to be conflictual.

The family environment, especially the quality of the marital relations between parents, may influence the attitudes towards marriage and the coupledom of the children who have become adults (and interviewees) but cannot explain, by itself, the relationship status of the latter. The effects of family relations cannot be completely isolated from those of other milieus and interaction partners. Nevertheless, it must be stressed that, without a family of one’s own, legalized or not, the most significant people in the life of the never-married, uncoupled and childless individuals remain the members of their family of origin (parents and possibly siblings). That has also been highlighted by several studies carried out in different cultural contexts, as well as by the online survey conducted in this study.

In addition to the issues related to the family of origin, the interviewees’ accounts revealed many “reasons” mentioned in social science literature for staying unmarried and childless - the focus on education and career, the breakup of shorter or longer couple relationships due to infidelity, the desire for freedom and independence, etc. These were more or less recognized and invoked as such by those interviewed.

The particular circumstances related to the family of origin, the educational and professional paths and the interviewees’ experiences in couple relationships must be understood within the general historical and sociocultural framework. As some interviewees pointed out, their development as adults took place in the context of reduced social pressure to achieve marriage and

⁴³Lahire, *Omni plural*, 19.

parenthood up to a certain age but also of lesser social benefits for married individuals and parents. These benefits have not completely disappeared, though. All societies have valued and rewarded, in one way or another, the formation of families while penalizing, even symbolically, the existence outside marriage and parenthood. Nevertheless, it has become much more acceptable, even in Romania, to marry much later than before. The postponement of marriage has sometimes less anticipated consequences (such as “permanent singlehood”).

Although they are far from idealizing marriage, the interviewees did not declare themselves (totally) against the institution of marriage and even less against the idea of coupledness or parenthood. However, what seemed to matter more to them, the older they get, is finding an “appropriate partner” whose presence could add value to their life and counterbalance possible “losses” (of freedom, independence, etc.). For the people interviewed, having a child represents a subsequent stage to forming a stable (ideally marital) couple. That seems to be a rather general attitude (and behavior) of Romanians, especially of highly educated Romanian women.

The ambivalence regarding one’s own status of “celibatar(ă)” [never-married]/ “singur(ă)” [single/alone] / “liber(ă)” [free] is accompanied by an attitude of expectation regarding finding a partner. In the case of middle-aged or older, highly educated, urban never-married women, this type of attitude, superimposed on relatively inflexible marital (partnership) preferences, significantly reduces the chances of forming a couple in a marriage (mating) market where they are at a great numerical disadvantage.

Research Limitations and Future Research Directions

The limitations of this research are primarily due to its exploratory character. Although many “doors” (themes) have been opened in this study, many still remained closed or only ajar. Obvious limitations stem from the non-probability sampling methods, the small sample sizes and the general lack of statistical representativeness, as well as the non-replicable character of the content analyses. Also, the demographic statistical data presented in this thesis did not include the 2022 census results, since they are not yet published.

In this thesis, it was suggested that in Romanian society the stereotypes and stigmatization of never-married childless people have persisted mainly due to the fact that, sometime in the past, they reached a social consensus, and since then they have never been critically analyzed or openly fought against. Studying the stigmatization of this category of people using methods and techniques that provide representative data for the Romanian population could be one specific line of research.

Another direction that can be pursued in the future is that related to accessing, possibly under a special regime, and processing demographic statistical data regarding marital status correlated with age, residence, level of education, type of household, number of births, etc. at the level of

smaller administrative-territorial units. This information could be useful in the analysis of local marriage (mating) markets, but also in the development of marketing and sales strategies for some product and service providers.

Given the trend (that seems to be continuing) that women outpace men in tertiary education, a study on a possible “marriage squeeze” phenomenon based on the education level could be extremely useful, as educational homogamy was proven to be one of the most stable factors in choosing marital partners.

Another topic that could be addressed in the future concerns the influence of the quality of marital relationships in the families of origin on the attitudes regarding marriage and coupledness and on the marital behaviors of young adults.