



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Between the couple and living alone

Citation for published version:

Jamieson, L 2020, Between the couple and living alone. in A Abela, S Vella & S Piscopo (eds), *Couple Relationships in a Global Context: Understanding Love and Intimacy Across Cultures*. European Family Therapy Association Series, Springer, Cham, pp. 329-344. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-37712-0_20

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1007/978-3-030-37712-0_20](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-37712-0_20)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Couple Relationships in a Global Context

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Between the Couple and Living Alone

Abstract

The trends of living alone and of formation and dissolution of couple relationships are not independent and their mutual influences need to be unpacked. Idealisation of couple relationships and gendered negative stereotyping of living alone persist even in countries where the trend of living alone at all ages is well developed. This is true even if the belittling of women is much softer than the open hostility to independent women in some parts of the world. This chapter focuses on issues between the couple and living alone in the stages of young adulthood to midlife when solo-living men temporarily outnumber women. It shows how routes into and experiences of living alone modify the pace and processes of becoming a couple and expectations of being a couple. Living alone slows down the process of becoming a co-resident couple when both parties live alone, but it may also result in a more considered exploration of fairness and equality in couple relationships. More honest dialogue ‘between the couple and living alone’ is in support of gender equality.

Key words

Solo, couple, single, living alone, gender equality, stereotypes

Introduction

It may seem paradoxical to include a chapter on living alone in a volume on ‘couple relationships’ but the pervasive trend towards living alone at all stages of the adult life course makes academic dialogue about the relationship between ‘the couple’ and living alone increasingly urgent. It is over simplistic to assume a state of emergency in couple relationships signalled by the increase in the proportion of adults living alone at all ages (Jamieson and Simpson 2013, Wasoff and Jamieson 2005). This increase is, however, clearly related to changing patterns of entering and leaving couple relationships as shown in the documentation of demographic trends further elucidated by qualitative research. Living

alone as a young adult is relatively common across the rich world, but particularly in northern and western Europe and parts of North America where it is normative to leave the parental home early in young adulthood (Sobotka and Touleman 2008, Jamieson and Simpson 2013, Klinenberg 2012). However, it is also becoming increasingly common in Asia (Yeung and Cheung 2015, Ho 2015, Raymo 2015, Yip and Forrest 2014). Irene Levin and Jan Trost (1999) suggested that once it became socially-accepted normal practice for a heterosexual couple to live together without being married, a trend that occurred first in the Nordic countries, then LATs, living-apart-together, that is, being self-defined as a couple but choosing not to live together, also became more imaginable. There has been much research and debate, for instance in France (Beaujouan et al., 2009), Spain (Castro-Martin et al., 2008); Germany (Ermisch and Seidler 2008) and the UK (Duncan and Phillips, 2010, 2011; Haskey and Lewis, 2006) which has established that choosing a long-term or permanent arrangement of being a couple without living together remains relatively unusual, except perhaps in later life. Nevertheless, the trends of living alone and of formation and dissolution of couple relationships are not independent and their mutual influences need to be unpacked.

In general, as the age of first marriage has risen, and the likelihood of living together prior to marriage has increased, so also has the number of young adults who have some experience of living alone prior to living with a partner. Analysis of longitudinal household survey data indicates that living alone all of adult life is far more unusual than spending part of the adult life span prior to age 75 living alone (Wasoff and Jamieson 2005). In southern Europe, it is not very remarkable for young people to live with their parents until they marry, hence continuing to combine the transitions of establishing a new household, entering co-resident partnership and changing legal status to married (Assave et al 2006). This pattern is utterly exceptional in northern Europe where these transitions are now typically separated in time and by interceding transitions (Lesthaege 2010). Leaving the parental home almost always occurs well before

marriage. For example, in the UK living away from the parental home rather than marriage is the required proof of independence and adulthood, although the practical possibilities of leaving home vary with economic circumstances, family support and local housing markets (Heath and Calvert 2013, Stone, Berrington, Falkingham 2011). For young people who have left home, returning is typically seen as undesirable, except as a temporary stop gap measure. Marriage is typically separated from the transition to a co-resident partnership since the overwhelming majority of those who marry have already established co-residence. In other words, marriage is no longer regarded as necessary step to establishing a long-term committed partnership, although it is still experienced as publically demonstrating commitment and establishing stronger security for children by legalising the arrangement. However, differences are diminishing between southern and northern Europe as cohabitation and living alone both become more common among young adults (Lesthaege 2010).

Living alone in the twenties to the forties age group is the corollary of disrupted partnerships as well as delayed partnership. When heterosexual parenting couples separate, most typically children and their mother become a lone parent family and men often become a one-person household. This and men's slightly lower rates of partnering, typically explain the excess of men living alone over women at working ages. These trends, however, do not signal a demise in the desire for or idealisation of being partnered, at least not yet (Jamieson and Simpson 2013). Depending on a person's cultural and biographical circumstances, living alone is typically experienced as either a normal stage of development, a part of becoming an independent adult, or as a necessary but undesired phase of life resulting from one of three conditions, failure to find a partner, the breakdown of a couple relationship or constraints preventing living with a partner although this is desired. Relatively rarely do young adults make an active choice to live alone as a way of avoiding couple relationships or wish to remain living alone despite becoming committed to a long-term couple relationships. It

remains likely, however, that as living alone becomes increasingly normalised then the weight placed on having a co-resident partner may wane. Also, any experience of living alone may modify subsequent partnership, including expectations of the relationship, the pace and complexity of making any move to co-residence, and the desired balance between sustaining a sense of autonomy versus investment in an identity as a couple.

Dialogue about the relationship between living alone and couple relationships is relevant to debates about the future of relationships and has the potential to enhance more immediately grounded understandings of the experiences of people living alone and in couples here and now. This chapter is structured around three such topic areas. The first concerns the circumstances and orientations to co-resident coupledom of the population who live alone, including those who define themselves as in a couple relationship. While cultural assumptions may suggest that a person who lives alone is likely to be single or perhaps divorced or widowed, without a romantic, sexual or legal partner, this is not, of course, necessarily the case. Those living alone yet in couple relationships are more varied and numerous than the minority proportion who choose to be LATs. They may be in the phase that most co-resident couples have had gone through of becoming and being a couple before living together. Those not in couples may be desperately seeking, biding their time, or, more rarely, indifferent or hostile to becoming a couple. In order to understand the changing trajectory of couple relationships and living alone, it is important to remain mindful of the variety of stages in and ways of being a couple, informed by an understanding of whether and how those who live alone see themselves and their future in terms of being a couple. The second concerns how the experience of living alone is changing the experience of becoming a co-resident couple. The proportion of people with experience of living alone has grown in many countries across all ages of adult life. As more people live alone prior to living with a partner, so the process of transition to a co-residential coupledom changes, as the meaning

and practical valence of moving in together is modified. It is obviously a very different sort of transition than the once traditional move from living as a grown-up child in the parental home to forming a new home as a married couple helped by their wedding gifts. People who have lived alone prior to becoming a couple bring different types of material and experiential baggage than those leaving the parental home. Knowing how people who live alone think and feel about that transition from their own home alone to a home as a couple adds to understanding the adjustments required in couple relationships as well as of the experience of living alone.

The third is more directly linked to the idealisation of couple relationships and concerns the continued misrepresentations in popular discourse perpetuating harmful assumptions and stereotypes that play coupledness off against singlehood and/or living alone. Living alone is a domestic-residence arrangement, a one-person household, dwelling and conducting domestic life alone but people living alone are often caricatured by assumptions about their relationships that blur solo-living and partnership status. Two gendered stereotypes of working-age people who live alone haunt popular culture - the swinging single, usually male, avoiding any responsibility or commitment to others and the desperately-seeking sad-and-lonely, usually female. These stereotypes set out a contrast between living alone and normal men and women, gesturing towards conventional gendered script about creating families and living happily ever after. They suggest that normal men are saved from being irresponsible, and normal women are saved from being sad and lonely, by living in co-resident heterosexual committed couples. Such stereotypes diminish the lives of people living alone. They may not amount to explicit misogyny and homophobia but are a close cousin and remain a supporting act.

Research Evidence

This chapter draws on the international research literature and a UK study initiated by the author, *Solo Living*, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, and conducted in Scotland (Jamieson and Simpson 2013). This involved telephone interviews with 140 men and women aged 25-44 who were identified as living alone in the Scottish Household Survey, (SHS) and face-to-face interviews with a much smaller sub-sample. The study was designed to compare the men's and women's experiences of living alone in cities versus more rural areas. Hence, although more men live alone than women in this age group, and there are many more people living alone in cities than in small towns and rural areas, our sampling strategy sought equal numbers of men and women, urban and rural residents. The transcriptions of the telephone interviews and follow-up in-depth interviews were read and reread, coded and analysed thematically.

Orientations to couple relationships among young adults living alone

In a growing number of parts of the world, some young people come to see living alone as a normal part of their development as an independent adult. As the previously cited literature shows, establishing a home alone as a young adult typically carries no determined stance against living with a partner in the future. The *Solo Living Study* found that a substantial proportion of young adults living alone are in some type of romantic and/or sexual relationship and some are already anticipating living with their current partner. Of course, the possibility of living alone also requires access to suitable housing and the economic means to maintain a household, conditions that vary across socio-economic backgrounds and have become more difficult for many young people since the economic crisis of 2008. In the UK, students now typically need financial support from their parents to be able to afford to live away from home at the point of going to university or college. However, many students continue to move away from home to live in student accommodation, share rented properties

with friends or in some cases to live alone, or transition to living alone at the end of their studies, particularly if they then secure employment. For example, Jake, age 28, represents the relatively privileged among young people who transition from shared arrangements to private renting alone or 'getting on the property ladder' by buying a home alone. He talks about living alone as a necessity for early-career geographically mobile young professionals.

It used to be I think the case in my parents' generation that people lived with their parents until they got married and then they lived with their husband or wife. I don't think that's the case any more. I think people are much more independent and more nomadic and move around a lot more, as I have done. So when you move around a lot, living alone is I suppose an inevitable consequence of that

Jake had successfully used his degree and professional qualification to gain a foothold in a graduate career that helped him acquire a mortgage of a two-bedroom city-flat in Scotland. He also knew he could rely on his middle-class parents for financial assistance. He assumes a future in which he will be co-resident with a partner. His way of talking about living alone in the meantime has no sense of regret or embarrassment. He was using internet dating as a way of meeting people, and, at the time of interview, had been developing a relationship for two months with a young woman whom he described as '*a potential rather than a serious partner*' because, in his words, it was too early to know yet whether it was going to become 'serious'.

Owner occupation and privately rented housing are unaffordable for many young people in precarious or lower income employment, but this does not extinguish the aspiration to live independently of parents. Among our interviewees, Alice's housing trajectory represents this less privileged group of young people living alone. She was living alone in a rural area, aged

36 when we first interviewed her and was renting a housing association apartment organised by her local council after waiting nine years to get such a tenancy.

I didn't live with my parents through choice, it was through necessity ... because I couldn't afford to rent privately, and obviously to get an association house or a council house you have to wait on a list ... It took me years to get a house [...] I had my bags packed and all [laughs]. As soon as I was offered it I took it.

Alice was not in a relationship at the time of interview but when asked about internet dating said '*that is my New year's resolution*'. There were relatively few possibilities of meeting potential partners locally but she was looking forward to a local pub opening and anticipated that it would have a darts team, as playing darts was how she met previous boyfriends. However, she also stressed a relaxed approach '*If it happens it happens, if it doesn't, it doesn't*'. Unlike Jake, however, she also expressed considerable wariness about co-residence.

While Jake and Alice see living alone as perfectly normal ways of being independent adults that require no apology, there were also interviewees who seemed to partially accept the negative views of living alone that permeate the stereotypes discussed in the final section of this chapter. They acknowledged a position of deficit, a second-best, I-have-no-other-choice situation, because of their lack of a partner. This was a view more frequently articulated in rural areas, perhaps because of the more intense social pressures: *Well, I'd prefer to live with the man of my dreams, but since he's not here, I live alone* (Sue, age 34); *I'd rather be living with a lassie [Scots for a young woman] but I've not had much luck getting a girlfriend at the moment.* (Benjamin, age 33).

In the *Solo Living Study* the majority of the young adults living alone were or had been in couple relationships and some had previous experience of a living together as a couple. Those

who had fallen out of co-resident or longstanding relationships spoke of missing intimate contact and the comfort of companionship but also of needing recovery time and being careful not to rush into new partnerships. Even when circumstances meant that living alone began with an ambience of regret at the loss of a relationship, a sense of peace and pleasure sometimes grew with time living alone rather than the episodes of loneliness. The pleasure of living alone then added to wariness about actively seeking a new co-resident partnership. On the other hand, some aspects of living alone could remain difficult; eating alone and cooking-for-one remained a challenge for many. The experience was rather different for those who were parents at the time of separation and remained in contact with their children. This typically meant also remaining in touch with their ex-partner. Some communication and collaboration with their children's co-resident parent was necessary in order to manage routines of hosting children for holidays or weekends. These parents typically made their home into a second home for their children and organised domestic routines around their coming and going. Responsibilities for children, in turn, made some parents wary about entering into new partnerships because of the potential implications for the time and space they could give their children in their lives. The failure of previous 'serious' relationships, and particularly relationships with children, has an impact on the experience of living alone as well as modifying openness to and timing of re-partnering.

Those who had never lived with a partner and were not in a couple relationship at the time of interview typically assumed having a co-resident partner at some time in the future. Some felt this would just happen naturally, *I would just hope to eventually, I suppose, meet somebody to want to settle down with*' (Jessica, age 31).and some were more actively seeking a partner Those who were in couple relationships were often considering co-residence or, like Jake, thinking it was still too early to know if this was 'the one' with whom they wished to make such a commitment. The exceptions were typically not interested in having children either

stating that they had never been interested or, for some gay men, had never considered it feasible or, for some heterosexual women, that they had already left it too late. Alice, for example, said: *Never wanted children, never will. Can't wait 'til I'm too old to have them by accident.* She was adamant that she would prefer a LAT relationship to cohabiting: *I would like someone in my life but they have their house, I have my house.* She immediately followed this up with the comment: *I'd be nobody's slave* and later elaborated on her assessment of the likely gender inequalities were she to cohabit with a boyfriend: She was not the only women in the study to conclude that co-residence would carry a risk of becoming her partner's domestic servant and this seemed to be particularly unattractive to women who felt that it was now too late to have children. Alice also had little faith in the long term harmony of couple relationships citing as her evidence: *all my friends are divorced; living with my mum and dad I can hear their arguments.* Alice is relatively unusual in her consistent stance against co-resident coupledness, but her reference to couple dissolution among friends is a device that women seeking a partner sometimes also drew on to stress the value of not rushing into relationships, the normality of periods living alone and absurdity of a discourse equating the absence of a partner with deficiency in a person.

How Living Alone Changes Becoming a Couple

When a couple shift from separate residences to living together, the different resources they bring include income, material stuff, social connections, skills and tacit knowledge. All of these are typically modified by living alone. When a couple considering co-residence each have their own household, the issue inevitably arises of who makes the move to whom or whether both leave their current home to establish a new joint household. There may be inequalities in the size or value of homes and the desirability of their location that come into play and for working men and women living in different cities, proximity to employment is also unavoidably an issue. These were the issues, for example, on the mind of Alexandra when she started a new

relationship at age 41. At the time of interview, she had not yet explicitly discussed such issues but was already considering them:

'although we're both seeing it as a long-term relationship, it's still, you know, early days to kind of like discuss those kind of things and well not discuss them but think about them but actually act on them because there's, it has, I can't think what the, knock on effect with kind of like my work, his work, where we live, who's house and I think I said you know, I've lived on my own for 20 years. I'm quite selfish now and also, his house is tiny. And I've got a bigger house. So it's kind of practical issues about where and... Yeah lots of things that really you know, in the next year will be discussed and sorted but it's kind of scary thinking about them at the moment.

For a couple coming together who have both been living alone, each will have developed predispositions honed through their experiences of establishing their own household and being in sole charge of their own domestic affairs. While it cannot be presumed that years of living alone will result in enhanced skill in looking after a property, managing domestic affairs and developing definite tastes in how a home looks, these are all possibilities. While not everybody who lives alone creates a home in which décor, furniture and contents project their identity and preferences, somebody who has taken pride in such a home may find it difficult to accommodate different tastes or accept indifference to its aesthetic. Living alone also involves control over scheduling time and use of space whether by maintaining conventional routines or choosing to do things differently. Adjusting to living with another person may prompt the recalibrating of schedules and accommodating to different uses of space. It should not be assumed that living alone reduces skills in negotiating shared space with others, since it is possible to live alone and yet maintain a highly hospitable and welcoming space that often serves as a home-from-home for others. However, research indicates that people who live alone often gain pleasure in their self-reliance, some develop predispositions to solitude and many

worry about whether they have become 'selfish' in ways that will make it more difficult to live with others. For some women, the self-reliance of living alone heightens wariness about entering into a relationship which feels like providing service and taking orders.

Most interviewees wished for a relationship that approximates equality accepting that this will involve some degree of 'give and take'. Prior experiences can be deliberately set aside but this often requires sustained effort and negotiation. For example, for a dual-earner heterosexual couple who share a strong desire to strive for equality of domestic effort and discuss avoidance of falling into practices that reproduce conventional gender roles, it can be difficult to overcome having been brought up in households where their parents adhered to gendered scripts and they previously learned gendered skills resulting in the woman being the better cook and more sensitised to standards of cleanliness as the subsequent example of Megan demonstrates. Not 'falling into gender' (Miller 2011) requires on going vigilance and dialogue, including a deliberate effort at skill sharing, prioritising mutual learning. Renegotiating a relationship of equals in the face of predispositions arising from experiences of exclusive control of time and space may similarly require effort combined with an understanding of the challenges involved.

Although Megan was living alone at first interview, by the second interview she had actually moved in with her partner. This interview is quoted at length because it illustrates the multiple ways in which the experience of living alone impacts on the challenges of living together. Megan had also changed employers to a less stressful workplace that enabled her to use her professional skills within conventional working hours, rather than having to take work home with her in the evening. This was informed by a medical condition that was generally under control but sometimes meant she experienced episodes of chronic fatigue. The job change involved a cut in salary. When asked if this was a concern she replied: *It's not a concern because I've moved in with Alan* acknowledging the greater economic security of sharing financial responsibilities and cost savings of living as a couple in comparison to living alone.

She went on to explain that when they started to consider living together as a couple, they quickly reached the view that Megan should move in with Alan and keep ownership of her own flat which she could rent out. Alan's flat was bigger and this arrangement gave them lower costs and the psychological security of knowing that they had not done anything irrevocable because they both still had their own homes and could return to their previous living arrangements if living together was not a success.

Megan talked about their attempts to be fair to both parties as they worked through various aspects of the challenge of moving into somebody else's house including dealing with the volume of clothes, kitchen utensils, books and other personal items that came from two households and the sensitivity necessary on both sides to each other's needs.

if you ever move in with a guy and you have to sort out his clothes make sure he's not there ... He very bravely attempted to try and bring his things into a smaller area. ... I am very much of the opinion that if you don't need it, you haven't used it for at least a year, charity it and that's what I did. Alan's more [for keeping things] [laughs] ... he did make a very good attempt and then between the two of us we did the rest. The most complicated bit actually is places like the kitchen ... trying to decide whose bowls to keep, whose, you know...

Megan recognised that there was much more to the business of making room for her things in Alan's house than equalising physical space for personal items. It was also about creating a situation in which she felt at home without destroying Alan's sense of being at home. This required both of them to have a sense of control over space and of their identity being expressed within the space.

I had to bring things to make this my space because when I moved in we didn't do any decoration, the house is in its colouring as Alan chose it and so therefore I very much had to make my mark on it without taking over at the same time. Very, very delicate balance to do that

and to make sure that he wasn't seriously affected by that or sort of feeling that I was taking over his space completely and so one of the things I have done is put up photographs of my family in the living room

She went on to describe items that they had both agreed could be put up in other rooms and the fact that her books were 'on display' in the sitting room: *So every room just about has something like that of mine in it, which grounds me. One of the things that touched me most about moving in here was I had a lot of books and I thought Oh! Gosh! Where am I going to put all these books and I did sort of [cut] them back a bit and got rid of a few to charity but it's books [laughs] you know, I can't get rid of them no matter how and if I do I just buy more so it was kind of we had to find space and Alan set aside spaces for my books and so all my books are in the living room out on display which really means a lot to me because he knows how much I enjoy reading*

However, before getting to this stage there was much discussion. This included the sensitive topics of financial commitments and responsibilities. It also included explicit discussion of their divisions of housework. Megan declared that:

we discussed everything. It was quite thorough. Money was definite. I wanted to see the breakdown of all the bills, not that I didn't trust him but I needed to know myself what the difference [in terms of costs] would be and also what he had in terms of, you know, things like insurance. I'm moving in with things. I want to make sure they are going to be covered. ...

Once they were living together, they found that they could make some further adjustments that reduce their costs and environmental impact

We did have two cars when I moved in, we've gone down to one so that was definitely a, you know, a conscious thought process, several reasons, environmental and money and space

Another area of discussion and negotiation prior to moving in was over sociability, ensuring that friendships were not neglected as a result of living together, that patterns of hosting and being hospitable to others at home could still be managed without conflict and that leisure activities that were important to them prior to co-residence could be maintained.

One of the things that is very important to me is to have good communication with friends. I think that's something that I've noticed with other friends that if they move in with their partners or get into more serious relationship it dies off and I was determined not to let it happen. my social life hasn't stopped at all when I moved in here.

Maintaining her separate social life and prior interests were an aspect of sustaining a sense of autonomy and personal identity alongside her increased investment in being and acting as a couple (Askham 1983, Gabb and Fink 2015, Van Hoof 2013). Another aspect of these difficult balancing acts touched on in Megan's account involves one of the pleasures interviewees sometimes claimed for living alone - the freedom to come and go without any requirement to be accountable to somebody else, versus the communication about coming and going that is required for the practical coordination of connected lives that are practicing mutual care for and about each other. Megan acknowledged an obligation that she and Alan communicate about elements of their social life that they continued to conduct separately

As I said earlier Alan has a very, very busy career and works very long hours so therefore he would not expect me to sit at home if he had to work, if he's got a function on in the evening he will tell me in advance so I can maybe arrange something else. And one of the other things I do which is very important to me is exercise and I have set exercise times that he knows about, where I am going to be, these nights I am going to be at this place doing this...

At the same time, this must not mean micro-surveillance of each other and some freedom to not consult had to remain. The experience of living alone meant being used to private down time at home without having to consult anyone else about what form this took. For Megan, it

was important to be able to spend time at home without any sense of pressure to talk, make polite conversation or report the details of how she was choosing to relax.

I don't feel like I have to be in the same room as him, there's no need to go and make conversation, I can watch what I like on TV, you know, these kind of things I think are what make it home as well, it's a place to relax and then I feel that he really has worked hard adjusting to make me feel like that and vice-versa. ... he has a play station and we manage to work round when he plays his play station and when I have my old movies on so I can do the ironing, and I say to him if 'I'm going to iron I'm sorry but I want the TV on my programs'

However, as is discussed further in the next section, the sharing of housework did not work out as they had discussed. Despite both being in the same profession and Megan having further to commute to work, Alan was ultimately judged to have less time, less skill and less interest in doing the work. He was in a higher-paid, higher-status, long-hours-culture job, the type of job that Megan had left. Megan's adjustment in her work commitment at the time of moving in with Alan effectively enabled the justification that his employment commitments trumped his obligations to perform domestic work. Over several decades, the research literature on dual earning couples has observed this pattern of women downsizing their employment commitment around the time of co-residence more often than men, subsequently doing significantly more domestic work than men (e.g. Mansfield and Collard 1988, Van Hoof 2013). Philosophical acceptance of 'falling into gender' was perhaps facilitated by Megan's sense of her own need to withdraw from a high stress career because of a medical condition that made her vulnerable to episodes of disabling ill health. The research literature on co-resident couples, shows that mothers who have prioritized the wellbeing of children over their own careers are often similarly philosophical about such adjustments.

Idealising coupledness and the gendered stigmatizing of living alone

In European and Euro-American societies, co-residential couple relationships remain the normative family form and living arrangement for adult life. Co-residential coupledness is routinely idealised as offering the most satisfactory living arrangement and support system for wellbeing across adulthood, as well as being lauded by moral commentators as the foundation of family life and the most appropriate arrangement for bringing up children. Legal acknowledgement of same-sex couple relationships has extended the category but it remains fiercely debated whether this has modified the emphasis on and valorisation of couple relationships in ways that enable a more general diversity in ways of doing and being in relationship that provide love and care (Butler 2002, Richardson 2004, Roseneil et al 2017). The emphasis on the primacy of the couple designates other arrangements as second best and the tendency to proselytize on behalf of coupledness amplifies a stigmatising discourse suggesting a deficit or inadequacy in the lives and the personages of those outside the co-residential couple arrangement.

For example, Annabel (age 30, urban) was made to feel uncomfortable by the many ways in which her friends communicated dissatisfaction with the fact that she had no partner, lived alone and is childless. These included her friends' repeated efforts at matchmaking, their eager suggestions that any man she might be seeing should move in with her, and pronouncements such as "*Oh, you don't know what you are missing!*" by a married friend who had recently had a baby,

That something more censorial, controlling and insidious is in operation than the valorisation of loving couple relationships is indicated not only by its bruising impact on the person being constructed as-if in deficit but also by the fact that such a discourse is not equally directed at men and women. Feminists have long argued that women play a part in policing and maintaining patriarchal systems. Annabel's women friends are helping to sustain a view that it

is particularly important that women should be partnered and have children, a view which is consistent with a conventional patriarchal gender regime that is intolerant of independent women outside the protection and supervision of a man. Support for such a regime is not the motivation. If this claim were put to her friends, they would likely repudiate support for such an 'old fashioned' view of couple dynamic, rather emphasising that they take it for granted that couple relationships should be between equals. However, given that many couples aspiring to be equals 'fall back into gender' (Miller 2011) perhaps they would also have to admit to slippage between this ideal of equality and their own couple relationship. Nevertheless, it is their failure to see success in and celebrate Annabel's independence that lends tacit support to gender inequalities and stereotypes. While men may also be cajoled for not having a partner, as another professional young women interviewee noted: *'If you are a woman who lived on her own and are happy to live on your own then there's something wrong with you. And that's an assumption made by both sexes. But if it's a man [living alone], then that's fine.'* (Lauren, age 37).

The differential stereotyping of men and women living alone reflects the legacy or continuity of patriarchal control over women and the double standard in sexual conduct reflected also in discourses around 'spinster' and 'bachelor' (DePaulo 2015, Lahad 2017, Reynolds, Wetherell and Taylor 2007, Simpson, 2015, 2006, Trimberger 2006). Men living alone are more likely to be stereotyped as 'foot loose and fancy free' assumed to be 'having a good time' whereas women living alone are more likely to be stereotype as 'sad and lonely'. However, it seems that growing numbers of women have the opportunity to defy these stereotypes, even if it is relatively rare to be as clear about this as Sophie: *I have a very male attitude towards relationships. Yes. So I don't mind having relationships but they - I really only want to have them on my terms and my terms are not about buying joint properties and certainly are not*

about moving. My life, my career is up here, my career is very important to me. (Sophie, age 38)

In the 1970s, feminists argued that the staging of romance and falling in love enabled individual women to enter couple relationship blinded to or sometimes despite knowing that they were participating in an arrangement that reproduced gender inequalities. One element of this analysis was pithily captured in the adage ‘it begins by sinking into his arms and ends with your arms in his sink’. Women now have much greater capacity to resist this specific scenario but can also be complicit in its continuity. As noted in the previous section, the constituency of women living alone who are actively resisting living with a partner often recognise that ‘hands in the sink’ remains a plausible prediction of the trajectory of a co-residential partnership. Alice quoted above went into detail about what she thought would happen if she were living with a local boyfriend: *‘It’d [It would] be like, where’s me [my] tea? [laughter] Where’s my shirt?’* When the interviewer asked about the possibility of a ‘new man’, she said, *‘There’s no such thing.’* In contrast, Megan had not anticipated any such inequality when she decided to make the move to a co-residential couple relationship. However, she then accepted ‘falling back into gender’ as part of the give and take of becoming a co-resident couple, acknowledging her partner’s longer working hours which excused his lack of housework underpinned the higher earnings that were an aspect of her own financial security. However, she went on to describe how she now considers herself as naïve to have ever thought that she could have had a 50/50 division of labour with any man of her generation given gender differences in learned predispositions and standards around cleanliness, tidiness and the house ‘looking nice’: *maybe it’s just a generational thing, I do not know, but in my opinion boys are not brought up the same as girls, they are not expected, especially boys of my age, they are not expected to do the same amount round the house and home as a girl would be*

It remains much more difficult for a woman than a man to live alone in many cultures, which invidiously stigmatise women who are living independently of parental control and outside of a partnership with a man. It would be extremely dangerous and near impossible for a young woman to live alone without parental support in parts of Asia, the Arab world and Islamic Africa where women's chastity is a matter of family honour, parents continue to exercise significant control over partnering, and remaining unpartnered and childlessness amounts to 'social death'. In Euro-American cultures, gender differences in the stigmatisation of living alone are softer but yet they still endure, making it difficult for women to claim contentment with living alone (Klinenberg 2012 p. 68, Jamieson and Simpson 2013, Simpson 2015, 2006). Ironically, the persistence of stereotypes also makes it more difficult for women to be very open about a desire to be partnered, for fear of being viewed through the stereotype as deficient and desperate (MacVarish, 2006). A sense of being outside the mainstream and socially excluded has been sufficiently strong to inspire blogs, social media networking and campaigning organizations (DePaulo 2015, 2006; Klinenberg, 2012; Lahad 2017; Trimberger, 2006)

Some women living alone, particularly professional urban women, were protected from stigmatising discourses and pressure to find a partner by friendship networks in which women living alone predominated. For example, Lauren described the normalcy of solo-living among her friends whom she characterised as educated women in the early 30s to mid 40s age-group: *'You get to like sort of late 30s and it's not uncommon for people to be living on their own either because it's the first time they've done it... due to separation of or a marriage breakdown or because that's just what they've always done since they've left home.'* But at the same time she remained aware of gendered stereotypes about solo-living women that circulate in the wider culture. The sparser population of rural areas and lower levels of living alone mean that rural solo-living women are less likely to have a protective network of other solo-living friends and

more likely to be very visible as a woman who is living alone. Nevertheless, some rural women maintained a fierce independence and determination to conduct couple relationships without bowing to conventional gender roles.

Conclusion

In the countries where the trend of living alone in the years of adulthood before midlife is advanced, those living alone typically see this as a phase that will end with co-resident coupledness. Nevertheless, Levin and Trost (1999) were correct in suggesting that the idea of being a couple and yet living apart is increasingly imaginable, albeit only a very small minority of those in early adulthood to midlife express a preference for long-term 'living apart together'. Those who do typically also reject having children or feel they are already 'too old' or their circumstances make having children too difficult. For some women, the self-reliance of living alone heightens wariness about relationships with men which risk feeling like providing service and taking orders. Enjoyment of living alone, makes continuing to live alone imaginable as a possible alternative future to being in a couple. As more working-age men than women live alone, particularly in the 30-59 age group, (European Social Survey) the experience it affords is not equally distributed.

Hesitation and delay in taking up co-residence is a likely outcome when two people living alone become a couple. Desire for delay is modified by routes into living alone. Those who have entered from a failed co-residential relationship often cite the need to recover or to protect time for the children of their relationships. However, living alone in itself causes delay in co-residence by adding new layers to the aspects of everyday life which require renegotiation in the process of making a new life together. Demographers note that delay in co-residential partnering is linked to delayed parenting and unintended infertility. On the other hand, the time taken may enhance the quality of the relationship.

When a couple come to live together, awareness of the pleasures of living alone can heighten efforts to attain fairness and awareness of the need to equalize belonging, ownership and autonomy in command of space and time within their home and their relationship. If women experience living alone prior to living with a male partner, awareness of the balancing acts between self-identity and identity as a couple may help to enhance the gender equality of heterosexual relationships or at least heighten awareness of 'falling into gender'. For some women, fear of falling into conventional gendered divisions of labour makes co-residence with any man a risky future; they do not wish to extend their domestic work to looking after another adult nor to reduce other commitments such as their focus on their career. Once having children is off the agenda, women's tolerance of 'falling back into gender' may be reduced and their wariness of co-residence enhanced. As yet, a shared culture of how to manage transitions from living alone to living with others is not well developed.

Conventional understandings of gender also inform the negative stereotypes of living alone that are the flip side of the over idealization of couple relationships as the true source of living happily ever after. There is no tradition of congratulating or celebrating the anniversaries of those who live alone and contentment in living alone is treated as particularly deviant among women. Consistent with the legacy of a tradition of patriarchal hostility to independent women outside the control by men, women are more likely to receive belittling remarks about 'missing out' by living alone while men are more likely to get compliments on their freedom or domesticity. Many who live alone in young adulthood want to become a couple but only some women and men take on a self-description that expresses a sense of lack. Since women alone are portrayed more negatively they have more reason to actively resist the stereotype and can end up self-censoring themselves to never acknowledge feeling lonely or any desire for a partner. Current stereotypes are likely to intensify the pain for those who long to find a partner and silence honest dialogue about the ups and downs of living

alone. Cultural acknowledgment of the achievements of those who live alone while remaining open and hospitable to others is overdue, along with recognition that this balancing act is relevant to couple relationships seeking to combine autonomy and mutual support, intimacy and equality.

Bibliography

- Aassve, Arnstein, Maria Iacovou and Letizia Mencarini. 2006. "Youth Poverty and Transition to Adulthood in Europe." *Demographic Research* 15(2):21-50.
- Askham, Janet. 1983. *Identity and Stability in Marriage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Beaujouan, E., Regnier-Loilier, A. and Villeneuve-Gokalp, C. (2009) 'Neither single, nor in a couple', *Demographic Research*, 21, 75–108.
- Butler, J. . 2002. 'Is Kinship Already Always Heterosexual?'. *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13:14-44.
- Castro-Martín, T., Domínguez-Folgueras, M. and Martín-García, T. (2008) 'Not truly partnerless', *Demographic Research*, 18, 436–468.
- Coulter, Rory and Yang Hu. 2017. 'Living Apart Together and Cohabitation Intentions in Great Britain.' *Journal of Family Issues* 38(12):1701-29.
- DePaulo, Bella and Bella M DePaulo. 2015. *How We Live Now* Simon and Schuster.
- Duncan, S. and Phillips, M. (2010) 'People who live apart together LATs – how different are they?', *The Sociological Review*, 58, 112–134.
- Ermisch, J. and Seidler T. (2008) 'Living apart together', in Ermisch, J. and Brynin, M. eds *Changing Relationships* (London: Routledge).
- Gabb, Jacqui and Janet Fink. 2015. *Couple Relationships in the 21st Century*: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Haskey, J. and Lewis, J. (2006) 'Living apart together in Britain', *International Journal of Law in Context*, 2, 37–48.
- Heath, Sue and Emma Calvert. 2013. 'Gifts, Loans and Intergenerational Support for Young Adults.' *Sociology*.
- Jamieson, L and R Simpson. 2013. *Living Alone* Palgrave.
- Klinenberg, Eric. 2012. *Going Solo*. The Penguin Press.
- Lahad, Kinneret. 2017. *A Table for One* Manchester University Press
- Lesthaeghe, Ron. 2010. 'The Unfolding Story of the Second Demographic Transition.' *Population and Development Review* 36(2):211-51.
- Levin, I. (2004) 'Living apart together', *Current Sociology*, 52, 223–240.
- Levin, I. and Trost, J. (1999) 'Living apart together', *Community, Work and Family*, 2, 270–294.
- Mansfield, P. and J. Collard. 1988. *The Beginning of the Rest of Your Life?* London: Macmillan.
- Raymo, James M. 2015. 'Living Alone in Japan: Relationships with Happiness and Health.' *Demographic Research* 32:1267-98.
- Reimondos, A., Evans, A. and Gray, E. (2011) 'Living-apart-together LAT relationships in Australia', *Family Matters*, 87.
- Reynolds, J, M Wetherell and S. Taylor. 2007. 'Choice and Chance: Negotiating Agency in the Narrative of Singleness.' *The Sociological Review* 55:331-251.
- Richardson, Diane. 2004. 'Locating Sexualities: From Here to Normality.' *Sexualities* 7(4):391-411. doi: 10.1177/1363460704047059.
- Roseneil, Sasha, Isabel Crowhurst, Ana Cristina Santos and Mariya Stoilova, eds. 2017. *Reproducing Citizens* Routledge.

- Simpson, Roona. 2015. 'Singleness and Self-Identity the Significance of Partnership Status in the Narratives of Never-Married Women.' *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*:0265407515611884.
- Simpson, R. 2006. 'The Intimate Relationships of Contemporary Spinsters.' *Sociological Research Online* 11(3).
- Sobotka, Tomáš and Laurent Toulemon. 2008. 'Changing Family and Partnership Behaviour.' *Demographic Research* 19(6):85-138.
- Stone, J, A Berrington and J Falkingham. 2011. 'The Changing Determinants of UK Young Adults' Living Arrangements.' *Demographic Research* 25(20):629-66.
- Trimberger, Kay. 2006. *The New Single Woman*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Van Hooff, Jenny. 2013. *Modern Couples?* Ashgate.
- Wasoff, Fran and Lynn Jamieson. 2005. 'Solo Living, Individual and Family Boundaries.' in *Families and Society: Boundaries and Relationships*, edited by L. McKie and S. Cunningham-Burley. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Yeung, Wei-Jun Jean and Adam Ka-Lok Cheung. 2015. 'Living Alone: One-Person Households in Asia.' *Demographic Research* 32:1099-112.
- Yip, Ngai Ming and Ray Forrest. 2014. 'Choice or Constraint? Exploring Solo-Living for Young Households in Hong Kong.' in *Urban Research Group—City U on Cities Working Paper Series, Wp No. 1*.