

Solo Living in the Neoliberal Era: Negotiating Ambivalence and Recuperation

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Abstract

Approximately one in four Australian households is currently occupied by someone who lives alone. In the past, the majority of those living alone have been older people, but the current demographic includes increasing numbers of people in their middle years. Despite this demographic shift, solo living remains almost unrepresented in the public realm and very little is known about the experience of living alone. This thesis provides insight into living alone by investigating how people who live alone structure and maintain social connectedness and intimacy. Thematic and discourse analysis of semi-structured interviews with 41 women and men between the ages of thirty and fifty-five, who have lived alone for three years or more, reveals solo living as a site of structural ambivalence. The sociological concept of ambivalence, in which sites of ambivalence are conceptualised as structurally produced contradictions which become manifest in interaction, provides a framework for understanding participant's experiences. This concept is useful in linking the ambivalence revealed within the narratives to the contradiction between the dominant neoliberal discourse of choice and the implicit obligation that adults in their middle years conform with coupled norms. These two dominant ideas of the neoliberal era, that on the one hand citizens are autonomous individuals who self-actualise through personal choices, and yet these autonomous individuals *ought to* enter into cohabiting coupled partnerships, entangle respondents within a perpetual process of recuperation. This process of recuperation highlights the contemporary discursive entanglement of 'coupleness' and cohabitation. While the ambivalence is an ongoing and essentially irresolvable conflict, the balancing process is shaped by respondents' capacities to present themselves in socially approved and favourable ways. This thesis provides insight into how neoliberal ideologies combine to restrict solo living individuals' ability to achieve a sense of unqualified social belonging. In broader terms, the thesis contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the somewhat dichotomised sociological debate about the liberating and stigmatising impacts of neoliberalism.

Declaration

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Ruthie O'Reilly

Date

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Introduction

Over the past forty years or so people have started living alone in historically unprecedented numbers. On a worldwide scale, the number of people living alone has increased from approximately 153 million in 1996, to 277 million in 2011, which represents a fifty-five percent increase in a fifteen year period. In Sweden, forty-seven percent of households contain one occupant, as do forty percent in Norway, and thirty percent in Japan, and the one-person household is currently the most common form of household in the United Kingdom (Klinenberg, 2012; Budgeon, 2008: 310). In Australia, the one-person household is currently the fastest growing household type (ABS, 2012). The Australian Bureau of Statistics estimates that the number of people living alone in Australia will rise from 1.8 million in 2001 to between 2.8 and 3.7 million by 2026. Consistent with the western worldwide trend, this prediction anticipates an increase of between 57 and 105 percent (ABS, 2008). Remarkably, these figures may underestimate the momentum of the trend, as researchers in the field have found that forecasters' estimates have been well exceeded in some cities (Ogden and Hall, 2004: 89).

While more people are living alone at all ages, the largest increases have been among men and women under retirement age (McRae, 1999: 20). The sharpest rise in solo living between 1986 and 2006 in Australia was in people aged between thirty and fifty-nine (De Vaus and Richardson, 2009: 8). Despite this significant demographic change, Australians who live alone are virtually unrepresented in the public and political realms and it seems to go unnoticed that approximately one in

four Australian households is currently occupied by someone who lives alone (ABS, 2012). This is particularly evident at election times when there is a notable silence about the solo living demographic in the policies and incentives aimed at ‘working families’.

Social theorists have proffered meta analyses of the move towards living alone. Among these commentators, the trend towards living alone tends to be linked with the increasing individualisation of society characteristic of post-industrialism. There are two distinct schools of thought on how the process of individualisation influences the move towards solo living (Bawin-Legros, 2004; Jamieson, 2009). One view portrays living alone as the end result of market driven individualisation, in which people are said to have forgone intimate commitments to maximise their autonomous freedom as consumers. Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (1995) argue that tendencies towards individualisation in a given society can be measured by the proportion of one-person households (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995: 9). While these authors position solo living to be the result of market forces, they also acknowledge that the concept of ‘freedom to choose’ is more complex than market determinism. The second school of thought proposes that the neoliberal veneration of the individual fosters social solidarity based on mutual respect for individual rights and this in turn advances progress towards more equal and democratic forms of intimate relationships. Amongst these theorists, the trend towards living alone is conceptualised as increasing liberation from traditional familial norms (Giddens, 1992). Although Giddens does not frame his understanding of intimacy explicitly in terms of neoliberalism, I, among others, read it as such. So, in sum, it is either theorised that the trend towards living alone is

symptomatic of decreasing connections between people and is therefore threatening to family life and social solidarity, or conversely, it is read as a liberating change that is not decreasing interpersonal relations, but rather, creating new and democratic foundations from which equal relationships can be sustained (Smith et al., 2005: 2).

Despite this substantial debate, however, very little qualitative in-depth work has been done to investigate how people who live alone negotiate this new way of life. My primary aim for this thesis, therefore, is to contribute to the field by investigating the personal implications of the move toward one-person households. In particular, using discourse analysis of semi-structured interviews with forty-one women and men between the ages of thirty and fifty-five, who have lived alone for three years or more, I investigate how people who live alone structure and maintain social connectedness and intimacy. In doing this, I also critically examine the existing macro theory to determine its relevance to the understandings and experiences of people who live alone in contemporary Australia.

I have organised this thesis into four main sections. The first section, Theoretical Underpinnings and Methodological Approach, includes Chapter One and Chapter Two, where I outline the relevant theoretical literature and the methodological approach I have taken. Chapter One provides a brief overview of the existing literature applicable to solo living, which includes theories of the social impact of late-modernity, individualism and neoliberalism, stigma, and ambivalence, as well as some research specifically focused on the one-person household. A number of disciplines within the social sciences, including sociology, political theory, and

philosophy, have long traditions of theoretical engagement with some of the concepts that I employ. However, within this thesis, I utilise previous scholarship only to the extent that it relates to contemporary forms of solo living. In Chapter Two I discuss my two stage methodological process in which I utilise thematic and discourse analysis, and the multidisciplinary approach I have taken to discourse analysis which encompasses a combination of sociological, constructivist feminist, and cultural theories.

The second section, The Social Context, is comprised of Chapter Three and Chapter Four in which I explore the contemporary social context and respondents' various and nuanced responses to it. In Chapter Three I begin to unravel the paradoxes in contemporary discourse which underlie a prevailing ambivalence in the narratives. I argue that the characteristic ambivalence is a manifestation of the contradiction between the dominant discourse of choice and the implicit obligation to observe existing coupled norms. I highlight the way respondents deploy, resist, and negotiate, the discourse of choice, and how this process is intrinsically bound up with stigma. In Chapter Four I discuss the stigma associated with living alone. I begin to demonstrate the gendered and classed operation of stigma, and argue that the stigma associated with solo living is multi-layered, deeply entrenched, often implicit, and not necessarily about living alone. The participants' stories reveal a discursive entanglement between 'coupleness' and cohabitation, which conflates the two issues, and as a result, the stigmatisation they encounter. I argue that although stigma is a significant aspect of participants' lives, it is neither hegemonic, nor is it

something universally and uniformly experienced by the participants, and they negotiate various means of recuperation.

The third section, *Managing Intimacy and Solo Living*, incorporates Chapters Five, Six, Seven and Eight, which investigate the nature and different dimensions of social life and relationships within the context outlined above. In Chapter Five I look at the various different frameworks which position working life at the focal point of most participants' narratives. I argue that working life is a central axis upon which the participants endeavour to balance the ambivalence produced by solo living. In Chapter Six I investigate the complex of cultural discourse pertaining to sex which impacts upon solo living individuals. I examine the way that participants feel required to demonstrate that they are sexually 'normal' and 'safe' and argue that while sex is not a central element of most respondents' lives, it is a central element of stigma about solo living. In Chapter Seven I discuss the respondents' interconnections with their friends and families and argue that it is in this realm that participants primarily sustain a sense of connection and intimacy, but it is also in this realm where they are inevitably required to negotiate a position in relation to pro-natalist, life-course, and nationalistic discourses. In Chapter Eight I explore the social connections that participants pursue outside of the immediate realm of family, friendships and the workplace. Specifically, I examine respondents' interactions with their neighbours and communities, their engagements with virtual connectedness, and their relationships with their pets. I argue that aside from relationships with pets, respondents' interpersonal connections outside of the immediate zone of friends, family and the workplace, are particularly mediated and tempered by stigma.

Finally, in the last section, Solo Living in the Neoliberal Era, consisting of Chapter Nine and the Conclusion, I discuss the outcomes and effects of the preceding three sections and conclude with some thoughts on the implications of the thesis for understandings of solo living. In Chapter Nine I argue that the extent to which participants are able to construct positive images of solo living is somewhat contingent upon their ability to balance the tension and ambivalence. I discuss and contrast the contentment with solo living that some participants describe, with the loneliness, depression and anxiety of others. I also argue that these two positions are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they exist in a state of ambivalence and tension which necessitates that participants engage in an ongoing process of recuperation. In the Conclusion, I reflect on the thesis with some ideas about how it supports and contradicts the existing theories on the move towards solo living. I outline the key findings of the thesis and suggest some ways in which it opens up opportunities for further research both about the relationship between sexuality, solo living and stigma, and the effect of structural contradictions on individuals who inhabit the ensuing sites of ambivalence.