Solo Living in the Neoliberal Era: Negotiating Ambivalence and Recuperation

Ruthie O’Reilly
B. Arts (Hons)

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Discipline of Gender Studies and Social Analysis, School of Humanities and Social Sciences

University of Adelaide

December 2012
## Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................v
Declaration .................................................................................................................................vi
Acknowledgments ........................................................................................................................vii
Introduction ..................................................................................................................................viii

### Section One - Theoretical Underpinnings and Methodological Approach

Chapter One - Literature Review.................................................................................................1
   Introduction .............................................................................................................................1
   Demographic Change ............................................................................................................2
   The Individualisation of Society ..........................................................................................2
   A Crisis of Intimacy ...............................................................................................................3
   Loneliness ...............................................................................................................................6
   The Democratisation of Intimacy ......................................................................................... 7
   A Transformation of Intimacy? .............................................................................................9
   The Transmutation of Intimacy ............................................................................................10
   Gender .................................................................................................................................12
   Neoliberalism .....................................................................................................................14
   Risk .....................................................................................................................................16
   Choice .................................................................................................................................18
   The Discourse of Positive Thinking .................................................................................19
   Stigma ..................................................................................................................................22
   Solo Living ...........................................................................................................................27
   Ambivalence ........................................................................................................................30
   The “Ideology of Marriage and Family” ............................................................................31
   Summary ..............................................................................................................................34

Chapter Two - Methodology ........................................................................................................37
   Introduction ...........................................................................................................................37
   My Analytic Approach ..........................................................................................................38
   Foucauldian Discourse .........................................................................................................39
   Constructivist Feminist Theory ............................................................................................42
   My Discourse Analysis .........................................................................................................44
   Recruitment and Response ..................................................................................................45
   The Respondents and The Interviews .................................................................................48
   Summary ..............................................................................................................................50

### Section Two - The Social Context

Chapter Three - The Choice to Live Alone...............................................................................51
   Introduction ...........................................................................................................................51
   Living Alone is My Choice and My First Preference ........................................................53
   Living Alone is My Choice but My Second Preference .....................................................58
Living Alone is Due To Circumstances Beyond My Control .................. 62
Living Alone is A Combination Of Circumstances And Choices ........... 66
Summary ................................................................................. 69

Chapter Four – Stigma and Solo Living .......................................... 71
Introduction ........................................................................... 71
History, Stigma and Solo Living ................................................. 72
Today’s Solo Living Stigma ...................................................... 73
Erving Goffman’s Stigma in the 21st Century ............................... 77
Stigma: 21st Century Style ...................................................... 78
Structural Stigma ................................................................... 80
Negotiating Stigma ................................................................ 80
Moral Stigma .......................................................................... 83
Sexual Stigma ........................................................................ 85
De-stigmatising Solo Living .................................................... 92
Summary ................................................................................. 93

Section Three - Managing Intimacy and Solo Living

Chapter Five - Career and Living Alone ........................................... 95
Introduction ........................................................................... 95
Women and Career ................................................................ 96
Men and Career .................................................................... 98
Work and Identity ................................................................ 99
The Gender Dynamic .......................................................... 101
The Neoliberal Working Paradigm .......................................... 102
Career and Ambivalence ...................................................... 107
Summary ................................................................................ 109

Chapter Six - Sex and Solo Living .................................................. 111
Introduction ........................................................................... 111
Hetronormativity .................................................................. 112
Sexual Euphemisms ............................................................. 114
Sexual Theory ...................................................................... 115
Women and Casual Sex ....................................................... 118
Men and Casual Sex ........................................................... 122
‘Outercourse’ ................................................................. 123
Post-Feminist Sensibilities ................................................... 127
Pornography ....................................................................... 129
Sex and Power .................................................................... 131
Resistance ............................................................................ 133
Summary ................................................................................. 136

Chapter Seven - Friends, Family and Living Alone ......................... 137
Introduction .......................................................................... 137
Active Friendship Networks .................................................. 138
Social Isolation ..................................................................... 140
Typical Friendship Networks ............................................... 141
Family .................................................................................. 143
Legitimating Solo Living ....................................................... 144
Moralism, Childlessness and Nationalism ............................................. 149
Life Stage Discourse ........................................................................ 155
Stigma and Childlessness ................................................................. 157
Recuperation ..................................................................................... 159
Summary ............................................................................................ 162

Chapter Eight - Connecting Outside the Friends and Family Zone ....... 164
Introduction ....................................................................................... 164
Neighbours and Communities ......................................................... 165
The Neoliberal Social Environment .................................................. 171
The Retail Community ..................................................................... 173
Internet Connections ........................................................................ 175
Dating Sites ...................................................................................... 177
The Negatives and The Positives of Social Networking .................... 181
Stigma and The Internet ................................................................... 182
Living Alone With Pets .................................................................... 187
Turning Empty Houses into Homes .................................................... 188
New Forms of Intimacy .................................................................... 191
Summary ............................................................................................ 192

Section Four - Solo Living in the Neoliberal Era

Chapter Nine - Anxiety, Ambivalence and Recuperation ..................... 194
Introduction ....................................................................................... 194
Loneliness ........................................................................................ 196
Future Loneliness ............................................................................ 200
Anxiety .............................................................................................. 205
Depression ......................................................................................... 208
The Neoliberal Production of Depression .......................................... 212
Resistance, Change and The Future .................................................. 215
Summary ............................................................................................ 218

Conclusion ........................................................................................ 220
Introduction ....................................................................................... 220
Theoretical Implications .................................................................. 220
The Neoliberal Moral Crusade ......................................................... 222
Further Theoretical Implications ....................................................... 224
Stigma, Neoliberalism and Solo Living ............................................. 229
Ambivalence ..................................................................................... 234
Anxiety and Choice ......................................................................... 236
The Solo Living/Normal Dichotomy ................................................ 237
Limitations and Future Directions .................................................... 240

Bibliography ..................................................................................... 242

Appendix - Bios .................................................................................. 253
Summary of Participants .................................................................... 253
Bios ..................................................................................................... 254
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

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent for this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University of Adelaide Library, to be made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

I also give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the World Wide Web via the University’s digital research repository, the Library catalogue and the Australasian Digital Theses Program (ADTP)

______________________________________________________________  __________________________
Ruthie O’Reilly                                            Date
Acknowledgments

First and foremost I wish to acknowledge the collaborative effort that has gone into the creation of this thesis. While officially I can claim this work is my own, I can only do so because of the generous input of the participants, my supervisors, my postgraduate colleagues, and the many theorists and social researchers whose ideas have informed my own. The time, effort, and personal stories that the interviewees volunteered provided me with a wealth of data, and even though I only met them once, I feel closely connected to each of them. It is my hope that our combined efforts will contribute to an honest and open public conversation about solo living. I would also like to take this opportunity to apologise that I was not able to use many of the pseudonyms the interviewees chose themselves, as my supervisors thought they were just too bizarre! To my supervisor, Associate Professor Margie Ripper, for her patience, insight, empathy, friendship, understanding, analytic proficiency, steadfast dependability, and remarkable depth of knowledge. Her ability to read between my lines and help me bring what was there into form, as well as her erudite supervision and invaluable mentoring, have been priceless gifts that will last a lifetime. To Dr Kathie Muir, for her ever-welcoming, friendly, egalitarian and encouraging approach to supervising this project and for her challenging and sharp insights often so very different to my own. To Professor Margaret Allen for her supervision, contributions, and kind support. To Dr Kate Cadman for her brilliant humour and for encouraging me to believe that those of us who feel out-of-place in a competitive environment, have valid contributions to make. To Dr Toni Delany for her precious and consistent friendship, assistance, inspiration and understanding. To Dr Penelope Eate for her friendship and help on the typo hunt. To my fellow travellers on the PhD roller-coaster, Dr Clare Bartholomaeus, Gabbie Ziizzo, Anne Burger, Kanchana Bulumulle, Jillian Schedneck, Nadine Levy, Sharyn Goudie, Tara Bates, and Damian Creaser, for their camaraderie, friendship and collegiality. To Sarah Hoggard for her assistance, kindness, and reliable dry humour. To Ryan Cortazzo for his diligent and affable help. To Dr Brad West for his influential mentoring throughout my undergraduate years and tenacious supervision of my Honours thesis. To Dr Jeanette Grove for helping me begin to believe I could do this. To Marsha Weston for believing in me. To my late grandmother, Nan, for noticing I could write, and encouraging me to so. To my brother Dave who has been my rock-steady dear friend and confidant not only throughout the exigent process of writing this thesis, but throughout my entire life. To my brother Paul for his lifelong love and for being someone I could not bear to admit defeat to, and finally, to my mother Carmel, for her ongoing encouragement, love and support.
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.
Section One

Theoretical Underpinnings and Methodological Approach
Chapter One - Literature Review

Introduction

In this chapter I provide an overview of the social theory that I will apply to this thesis. I demonstrate how various social theorists have linked solo living with the social impact of late-modernity, individualism and neoliberalism, and establish that the trend towards living alone is primarily theorised as either as an indication of declining connections between people, or it is read as a beneficial change that is democratising the private realm. In this chapter I also outline various theorists’ ideas about neoliberal methods of governance and subjectification, which include several popular discourses such as that of choice, enterprise, and positive thinking, as well as the dominant discourse of marriage and family. I also introduce the sociological concept of social stigma and review some recent analysis of how stigma operates in the neoliberal environment. I point to the ways in which neoliberal discourse supports the stigmatisation of individuals for their less than ideal circumstances and show how solo living is constructed as less than ideal. I also discuss the sociological concept of ambivalence, which emphasises the interface between individual action, human agency, and structured social relations. Furthermore, I begin to demonstrate that the concept of ambivalence is a central element of my theoretical approach.
Demographic Change

Existing research on the trend towards solo living suggests that beginning in the 1960s, the socio-economic restructuring in post-industrial nations has given rise to what Ogden and Hall (2004) have termed “the second demographic transition”. The definitive features of this transition are a sharp rise in one-person households; an increase in divorce and couple separation; a rise in lone parent families; the deferment of marriage; an increase in cohabitation; declining fertility rates to below replacement levels, and later childbearing. Interacting with these trends is an increase in the average lifespan, and a range of changes in attitudes to intimacy, contraception, abortion and sexual orientation. The broad effect on households has been a reduction in their average size, the introduction of new household forms, and an increase in the number of moves between different types of households (Chapman, 2004:159; Ogden and Hall, 2004: 8; McRae, 1999). Ogden and Hall estimate that the international influence on lifestyles and impact on household structures of the second demographic transition is comparable to the demographic ‘revolutions’ of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Ogden and Hall, 2004: 8).

The Individualisation of Society

Various social theorists including, Bellah et al., (1985), Bauman (2001, 2003, 2005), Putnam (2000), Giddens (1992), and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) have proffered analyses of the trend towards solo living. Among these commentators, the movement towards living alone is invariably conflated with the increasing individualisation of society (Jamieson, 2009: 1.4). There is a general agreement that traditional social unions and structures of authority have been gradually superseded by cultural ideals of personal identity, self-sufficiency, and self-protection, which
foster the performative management of self as a key priority. Relative to the modern social world, the late-modern social world is destabilised and deregulated, and individuals are ostensibly free to enact a new level of personal choice and self-experimentation. A further point of general agreement among these social theorists is that the cultural turn to individualism\(^1\) has fostered a decline of standardised models for intimate relationships. (Bauman, 2003; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Giddens, 1992). The effect of the individualistic turn upon the social world and the trend towards living alone, however, divides this consensus into two broad schools of thought.

**A Crisis of Intimacy**

One view portrays solo living as the end result of a selfish and narcissistic individualisation, in which intimate commitments with others have been traded for autonomous freedom as unrestrained consumers of lifestyles and identities (Jamieson, 2009: 1.5). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim argue that heterosexual couples are now less likely to sustain long-term relationships because free-market forces have balanced the ratio of women and men in the labour force which has engendered gender rivalry (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995: 9). Zygmunt Bauman has written at length on the caustic effect of the post-industrial idolisation of consumption, mobility and disposability, which, he argues, causes perpetual anxiety and reduces the human propensity to structure lasting and meaningful relationships (Bauman, 2000, 2001, 2003, 2005).

---

\(^1\) I use the term individualism throughout this thesis to refer to the philosophical tradition which values the moral worth of the individual. I use the term individualisation to refer to the social changes which dominate late modernity whereby individuals are increasingly required to both construct and be responsible for their own lives.
In *Liquid Love* (2003) Bauman discusses what he sees as an increasing mistrust and anxiety about making commitments with others. Sharing the Marxist view that capitalism is the determining source of power, Bauman argues that this unease is due to the fact that long-term commitments contradict neoliberal free-market logic. He proposes that restrictions placed on the ability to remain open to new intimate possibilities can weaken individuals’ autonomy and limit their agency as unfettered consumers:

If found faulty or not ‘fully satisfactory’, goods may be exchanged for other, hopefully more satisfying commodities...But even if they deliver on their promise, they are not expected to be in use for long; after all, perfectly usable, shipshape cars, or computers, or mobile telephones in quite decent working condition are consigned to the rubbish heap with little or no regret the moment their ‘new and improved versions’ appear in the shops and become the talk of the town. Any reason why partnerships should be an exception to the rule? (Bauman, 2003: 13).

At the same time, however, people generally desire, or enter into, long-term intimate commitment. Bauman argues that the application of consumer rationality to human sexuality and intimacy is therefore causing a widespread ambivalence within human relationships (Bauman, 2003: 9). Bauman asserts that an individualised, deregulated and fragmented social world promotes the idealisation of love and long-term commitments and simultaneously produces a cultural medium which does not foster the inception or survival of such long-term commitments. An effect of this, in Bauman’s estimation, is “a trained incapacity for loving” (Bauman, 2003: 5). He argues that the exchange of support and dependency in partnerships has been replaced by the pursuit of profit, pleasure and desire, and relationships are now understood as conditional contracts. Committed partnerships, therefore, in Bauman’s view, are the most problematic embodiment of the prevailing ambivalence of the contemporary social world:
Love’s promises are as a rule less ambitious than its gifts. Thus the temptation to fall in love is great and overwhelming, but so also is the attraction of escape. And the enticement to seek a rose without thorns is never far away and always difficult to resist (Bauman, 2003: 9).

Bauman’s theory of “liquid modernity” characterises contemporary social life as a balancing act between loneliness and freedom. In his estimation, the influences of neoliberal free-market fundamentalism blend with current discourses of freedom, choice and desire, to generate an ephemeral or “until further notice” quality in both social and workplace commitments (Bauman, 2003: 10). Thus, human relationships no longer provide secure foundations for social wellbeing because they no longer function to produce stable cultural and personal identities. He argues that these adjustments in understandings and practices of human connection have cultivated new and endemic forms of loneliness that affect not only the socially isolated, but the vast majority of people:

The sole character the practitioners of the market are able to and willing to recognise and accommodate is *homo consumens* – the lonely, self-concerned and self-centred shopper who has adopted the search for the best bargain as a cure for loneliness and knows of no other therapy; a character for whom the swarm of shopping-mall customers is the sole community known and needed; a character whose lifeworld is populated with other characters who share all those virtues but nothing else besides (Bauman, 2003: 69).

Bauman’s theory of liquid modernity characterises a breakdown of human relationships. He discusses atomised cohabiting families who live in separate rooms, where family dinners are dominated by mobile phones, and each member is essentially alone. He theorises that, on the whole, human relationships have become “top pocket relationships” which are easily accessed and equally easy to discard (Bauman, 2003: 21). While Bauman does not specifically address the issue of solo living, it is a logical extension of his work to surmise that the isolates he describes would contribute to the rise of one-person households.
Loneliness

Adrian Franklin (2009) argues that high levels of loneliness are often attributed to the fact that people are increasingly mobile and not situated in, or focused around, localised communities. Bauman calls this mobility “extra-territoriality”, which Franklin argues has important consequences for how loneliness impacts upon the individual and how we understand it as a spatially located emotional experience. Building on Bauman’s work, Franklin suggests that because relationships no longer embody the same emotional value that they once did, imagining the cause of loneliness as the breakdown of communities in particular places (Putnam, 2000) may be a misconception. Franklin proposes that as well as the location, spatial density and frequency of social interactions, it is also the nature of social bonds that have fundamentally changed, and it is this change that has paved the way for historically unparalleled levels of loneliness (Franklin, 2009: 347). In a representative sample of Australians surveyed by Franklin and Tranter (2008), thirty-four percent of women and thirty-three percent of men agree with the statement, ‘Loneliness has been a serious problem for me at times’ (Franklin and Tranter, 2008: 2). Franklin and Tranter conclude that approximately thirty-six percent of Australians are currently “chronically lonely”, and this figure increases to forty-two percent in the twenty-five to forty-four age cohort (Franklin and Tranter, 2008: 10). On the other hand, Michael Flood (2005) argues that the lack of longitudinal data on loneliness obscures whether there is in fact a ‘crisis of intimacy’ as theorists such as Putnam, Bauman and Franklin propose, but even so, he suggests that there are groups of people in Australia for whom loneliness and social isolation are a “way of life” (Flood, 2005: 38).
The Democratisation of Intimacy

Classic sociologist Emile Durkheim’s (1912) thesis of a socially integrative moral individualism has seen something of a revival within the second school of thought regarding the effect of individualisation on the private realm (Santore, 2008; Jamieson, 2009: 1.6). These theorists propose that social solidarity is increasingly based on mutual respect for individual rights. Anthony Giddens’ (1992) *Transformation of Intimacy* has been influential in developing this perspective. Rather than positing a move towards the singular individual in an atomised social environment, Giddens theorises progress towards more equal and democratic forms of intimate relationships. There is a general consensus within this body of work that the intimate sphere has been subject to a ‘transformation’ whereby the emancipation of sexuality from former social sanctions has liberated pre-existing gender roles and conventional relationships, and released individuals from traditional gender and sexual regulations. It is argued that de-traditionalisation, deregulation and destabilisation of the traditional bases of identity, such as gender and sexuality, have provided an unprecedented degree of freedom to exercise individual choice in sexual and relational practices (Budgeon, 2008; Becker and Charles, 2006; Roseneil, 2007; Giddens, 1992). While there are undeniably substantial differences between the positions held by these various theorists, they are similar in that they each posit that the ‘transformation’ of intimacy is a liberating social change which allows people new freedoms to choose the types of relationships they enter into and sustain.

Giddens (1992) argues that the influences of the mental health system and psychotherapeutic discourse on the realm of intimacy have fostered a culture where
the discourse of self-fulfilment and personal growth have replaced traditional narratives of romantic love as the standard against which intimate relationships are judged (Giddens, 1992: 101). From this perspective, contemporary intimacy is thought to be structured around rational discourse that promotes more egalitarian, democratic, and mutually supportive relationships than those practiced throughout the modern era (Jamieson, 2009). Sasha Roseneil (2007) argues that unconventional relationship practices that have typically been conceived as characteristic of the gay and lesbian communities, such as the prioritisation of friendships, movement between categories of friend and lover, and the importance of ex-lovers in an individual’s social network are being increasingly adopted in the wider community. She suggests that these types of practices assist in the repatriation of selves disengaged by processes of individualisation, and argues that the prioritising of friendships, the decentralisation of sexual and love relationships, and the forming of non-conventional partnerships present a challenge to the dominant model of personal relationships (Roseneil, 2007: 87-93). Becker and Charles (2006) propose that the meaning of family in different social contexts and as used by different people is varied and divergent and that understandings of family are increasingly defined through family practices rather than being constituted by a definitive structure (Becker and Charles, 2006: 103).

Giddens argues that intimate relationships have become the primary axis around which men and women find “forms of self-exploration and moral construction” (Giddens, 1992: 144). He further postulates that sexuality has become the key means of both self-realisation and expressing intimacy (Giddens, 1991:164). According to Giddens, this is evidenced by the “flourishing of homosexuality”, a
generalised preoccupation with the body and exploring sexual pleasure, and the liberation of women from patriarchal sexual control (Giddens, 1992: 28). Giddens proposes that the “pure relationship”, which he argues has become a widespread social norm, involves partners taking pleasure in one another’s distinctive character and creating trust through mutual disclosure. A primary element of the ‘pure relationship’ is that dissolution of the relationship is supposedly unproblematic because of the discourse that both partners are equal and commitment lasts only as long as the relationship suits them both (Giddens, 1992: 58). Thus, the ‘transformation of intimacy’ is said to enable the democratisation of the interpersonal domain where intimacy is a transactional negotiation of personal ties by equals, as opposed to a demand for constant emotional closeness. Intimacy in this context, according to Giddens, is dynamically synchronised with democracy in the public sphere (Giddens, 1992: 3; Gross, 2002: 539).

A Transformation of Intimacy?

Other theorists, such as Lynn Jamieson (1999, 2009) and Neil Gross (2005) argue that the ‘transformation’ of the intimate realm is overstated. While popular discourse supports the view that heterosexual relationships are more equal and intimate than they have been in the past, Jamieson argues that on the contrary, far from a ‘transformation of intimacy’, most intimate relationships remain characterised by entrenched structural inequalities. Jamieson argues that the existing gap between cultural ideals and structural inequalities has culminated in a wide range of creative relationship saving strategies such as emotional acting and making allowances for inequalities within relationships. Practical, domestic and economic issues remain fundamental concerns within many intimate relationships and long-

Neil Gross (2005), on the other hand, argues that the transformation of the intimate realm is overstated because social structures exist and reproduce themselves through the coordinated execution of interpersonal conventions and although people are experimenting with new ways of relating, the traditional structures of romantic love and marriage remain firmly entrenched (Gross, 2005: 291). Gross argues that while people who do not get married or enter into long-term commitments are subject to fewer and less severe social sanctions than in the past, the traditional form of ‘the couple’ continues to function as a hegemonic ideal in contemporary society (Gross, 2005: 288). The link to tradition is reflected in ABS data, which reveals that marriages registered in 2010 represented the highest number of marriages registered in a single year, and although the crude marriage rate is now lower than it was twenty years ago, this rise continues a steady increase in the number of marriages since 2001 (ABS, 2011). Furthermore, in 2006, two thirds of Australian adults were currently either in a registered or a de-facto marriage, and of those who were in a de-facto marriage, forty-two percent expected to marry their existing partner in the future (ABS, 2009).

**The Transmutation of Intimacy**

Gabriel Bianchi (2010) argues that the popular focus upon the transformation of intimacy overlooks the fact that its content as well as its form is simultaneously undergoing a “transmutation” in which the satisfaction of intimate needs have been substituted with identity creation. She draws on Richard Sennett’s (1986)
argument that the present ‘ideology’ of intimacy “transmutes political categories into psychological categories” and diverts attention from political structures onto personal selves (Sennett, 1986: 259). Sennett argues that there are three fundamental principles underlying this present conceptualisation. These are: the idea that close relationships between people are a moral good; the objective to develop identity through experiences of closeness with others, and the understanding that discordant human relations are at the basis of all personal and social difficulties. Sennett argues that these three principles or “myths” have created an “intimacy ideology” that exemplifies a society in which love and intimacy have been exalted and become sacred. Now the primary source of collective identity, intimacy, he argues, is our secular god (Sennett, 1986: 259-61). Bella DePaulo and Wendy Morris (2005) investigate the contemporary ‘cult of the couple’ and argue that perhaps to a greater extent than ever before, people are investing their time, attention, emotions, and resources into their marriages and families. They propose that this culture of intensive coupling, parenting and nucleararity, is occurring not despite, but because, of the contrary demographic trends. According to DePaulo and Morris, the growing proportions of single people, couples without children, and non-nuclear families, challenge fundamental beliefs and values at the centre of the dominant ideology of marriage and family (which offers a simple, safe, and compelling world view), and reacting to that threat, people adhere to the ideology with renewed and defensive loyalty (DePaulo and Morris, 2005: 60).

A number of theorists including Goldcheider and Waite (1991), McRae (1999), and Wall (1989) also argue that ideas about recent social transitions and transformations are overestimated. McRae (1999) argues that much of the change we see in family
structure today, can be viewed as the continuation of long standing trends that were temporarily disrupted by the hegemonic ‘ideal family’ of the post war baby boom (McRae, 1999: 2). Goldcheider and Waite (1991) argue that the ‘second demographic transition’ has been taken out of context, as analysis of temporal family change is distorted if the 1950s are taken as the starting point from which to measure change. The 1950s was exceptional in that it was the middle of the baby boom, a period in which more people got married and got married younger than they had done in the past. It was also a period in which people were reproducing at a younger age and at faster rates than had previously been the case (Goldcheider and Waite, 1991: 7). Wall (1989) argues that continuity in living arrangements can be seen between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to present day circumstances. Lone parenthood, he proposes, is as common now as it was then. In Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the primary cause of lone parenthood was being widowed, whereas in contemporary society, the main cause of lone parenthood is either having never been married, or alternatively, having been divorced (Wall, 1989: 374). While the overestimation of recent demographic changes in the wider context of social history is a substantial assertion, other theorists such as Buzar et al., (2005) propose that arguments negating the significance of the trend fail to acknowledge the longer term implications indicated by recent changes in family patterns, to which the unprecedented rise in one-person households must be included (Buzar et al., 2005: 416).

**Gender**

The changing structure of households has been linked to changing gender roles, especially the rise of women’s paid employment, education, religion, and
consumerism (Ogden and Hall, 2004: 89). Connell (1995) argues that sex roles and gender relations can be understood as socially constructed or constituted in discourse. Much of society’s framework is based on ‘commonsense’ concepts of masculine and feminine, which are embedded within specific social practices (Connell, 1995: 3). Connell’s proposition that gender roles are fluid and gender norms change through social processes (Connell, 1995: 23) provides insight into a common theme in the work of scholars disseminating the individualisation thesis, whereby women are thought to be at the leading edge of social evolution and the movement towards living alone (Jamieson, 2009: 1.9). Theorists including Giddens (1992) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) argue that developments such as second wave feminism, the ability to control fertility, augmented expectations of equality in relationships, and the integration of women into the paid work force have set the stage for women to become less willing to forgo their own personal development for the sake of their families, and, in seeking more egalitarian and intimate relationships, are the drivers of social change (Jamieson, 2009: 1.9). While this is a logical progression which arguably holds weight, Jamieson proposes that the quantitative evidence does not support the assumption that women are strong drivers of the movement towards living alone (Jamieson, 2009). Jamieson’s assertion is borne out in data from the 2006 Australian census analysed by De Vaus and Richardson (2009) which demonstrates that within the cohort of people of working age, significantly more men than women live alone (De Vaus and Richardson, 2009). The majority of women living alone in Australia are concentrated in the fifty years or older age brackets, whereas solo living men primarily fall into the thirty to fifty-nine cohort (De Vaus and Richardson, 2009: 9). This difference in the gender distribution within one-person households appears to
be an international trend. Smith, Jamieson and Wassoff’s (2005) study on living alone in the UK, finds that young men are approximately twice as likely to live alone as young women (Smith et al., 2005: 1). Jamieson argues that while this can partly be explained by the convention of women living with the children when conjugal relationships dissolve, the gender distribution within the trend of solo living presents to researchers in the field as something of a mystery (Jamieson, 2009: 2.5). Jamieson proposes that the common neglect of the fact that more men than women live alone is fostered by the clash between it, and the individualism thesis which posits that solo living is due to the transformation of personal life which is being driven by women (Jamieson, 2009).

**Neoliberalism**

Theorists such as Nicolas Rose (1996, 1998), Paul du Gay (1997), Renata Salecl (2003, 2008, 2010), Richard Sennett (1977, 1998, 2006, 2008), John Bone (2010) and Barbara Ehrenreich (2009) have contributed to a large body of work investigating the social impact of the socio-economic restructuring and the associated methods of governing organisational and personal conduct, which coincide with the changes seen in the personal realm which I have outlined above. Throughout this thesis, I will refer to this socio-economic restructuring and the allied methods of governing as neoliberalism. Because there is considerable variation in the way the term neoliberalism is used, it is necessary to define my use of the term here. Following many theorists including David Harvey (2005) I use the term neoliberalism to refer to the rationalities which emerged throughout the Thatcher-Reagan era, involving both economic restructuring and a moral campaign. As Margaret Thatcher argued, “serious as the economic challenge is, the political
and moral challenge is just as grave, and perhaps more so, because economic problems never start with economics” (quoted in Hall, 1988: 80).

The neoliberal project implemented new modes of government and subjectification which facilitated the reformation of government and the restructuring of the state via the deployment of market mechanisms and ‘enterprise models’ (Barry, Osborne and Rose, 1996; Rose, 1999; Cruikshank, 1999; Harvey, 2005; Peck, 2008; Miller and Rose, 2008). Du Gay proposes that the neoliberal discourse is principally mobilised through the management strategies of businesses and organisations which have melded economically rationalist theories with psychological theories of choice and self motivation. These strategies have been applied in programs of workplace reforms such as the implementation of team responsibilities and performance related pay, which contribute to the construction of enterprising, self-regulating, self-actualising, responsible individuals, who are continuously reactive to environmental fluctuations, and whose goals and objectives are aligned with the neoliberal agenda (du Gay, 1997).

Du Gay argues that Adam Smith’s eighteenth century laissez-faire economic liberalism positioned the ventures and profits of economic actors beyond the reach of government, whereas today’s ‘entrepreneurial’ economic agent is contracted, and thus a fundamentally manipulable and flexible creation, who is subject, and continuously reactive, to modifications within the political environment (du Gay, 1997: 301). In this way, neoliberalism has encroached upon the traditional boundaries between work and leisure, and production and consumption, which have become intrinsically entwined. Notions about what should be public and what ought
to be private have become blurred, as the state itself progressively organises itself around ‘profit centers’ and ‘enterprise models’. Behaviours which demonstrate enterprising qualities such as initiative, personal responsibility, self-reliance and risk taking, are represented as the most appropriate forms of conduct for all individuals and collectivities, at all times, whether business, private or voluntary (du Gay, 1997: 300).

In Sennett’s (2006) view, the neoliberal workplace has disoriented individuals’ efforts to plan their life courses strategically and people are left feeling somewhat “cast adrift” (Sennett, 2006: 7). Sennett argues that a fragmentation of big institutions has resulted from both the workplace changes driven by the reorganisation of bureaucracy around the economic sectors of global finance, technology, media and merchandising, as well as the reconfiguration of corporations which now engage a clientele of investors more focused on short-term returns from investment shares than on the longer-term proceeds of dividends (Sennett, 2006: 6). In turn, a reappraisal of long-term service and loyalty to a particular place of work no longer earns employees a guaranteed position, and people are increasingly managing short-term relationships while migrating between different tasks, jobs, and workplaces (Sennett, 2006: 4).

**Risk**

Du Gay proposes that essential to neoliberal discourse is the belief that bearing the risks of one’s involvement in any activity provides the means to individual empowerment. Individual freedom can only be gained, it is theorised, if individuals are enabled to build resources in themselves as opposed to depending upon others to
assume responsibilities and take risks on their behalf (du Gay, 1997: 303). The contemporary deployment of neoliberalism as a political weapon is common across Conservative political parties in the West including Australia. It is also adopted as a frame by many in populist forums such as talkback radio and vox-pop discussions as a means to justify the common anxiety that assistance should not be given to those considered undeserving. The term choice is employed to confer personal blame such that the choice to get on an ‘illegal’ refugee boat, for example, or the choice to live alone, or the choice to have six children, designates personal culpability. These uses of the term function to support the arguments of those who believe that the government should reduce welfare programs and hold people accountable for the choices they make.

Ulrich Beck (1992) argues that the notion of risk has particular significance in the late-modern context. The modernist solution of developing technology to increase production and thereby increase the general level of wealth, had the unforeseen consequence of producing global risks. In a post-modern context, Beck argues, the “manufactured risks” of the previous era have become a focal point of current action, such as prevention, compensation, or management of events that have not yet occurred. The potential threats from nuclear catastrophes, or the unintended negative consequences of genetically modified crops, for example, have given rise to entire industries structured around the calculation of risks and protection by insurance liability laws, which facilitate a sense of security in the face of an indeterminate future. Beck argues that today’s “risk society” is a normative system of rules for social accountability, compensation, and precaution, underpinned by the view that both current and future risk can be controlled through human intercession.
This ‘risk society’ is underpinned by a discursive scheme which links risk with notions of responsibility, blame and choice (Beck, 1992: 100).

**Choice**

Proponents of neoliberalism, such as Gordon (1991), argue that positioning the human capacity for choice as the fundamental principle driving economic advance is a reactivation and radical inversion of Smith’s economic theory (Gordon, 1991: 43). Renata Salecl (2008) argues that this discourse of choice, informed by the specific idea of rational choice hailing from the realm of economics, has been widely accepted as the definitive understanding of what choice actually is. She proposes that the economic theory of choice has progressively filtered through into all other aspects of life (Salecl, 2008: 165). Salecl investigates the contemporary dominance of the discourse of choice and argues that people are forced to choose, not only in relation to an abundance of everyday needs, but also to make choices about their sexuality, gender, marriage, childbearing and identity. This is supported by the idea that the more choices there are, and the more ‘informed’ people are about the options, the more possible it becomes to achieve an ideal result. Salecl proposes that we are encouraged by market strategists to be anxious about our ability to produce a satisfactory self. The necessity to make intelligent choices between seemingly limitless options, therefore results in a perpetual state of anxiety about whether we have made the right choices and if we could be happier had we made better ones. Thus fears about our adequacy as autonomous individuals who are capable of making ‘good’ choices, lure us to exist in the perpetual state of uncertainty upon which the neoliberal market relies (Salecl, 2003, 2008, 2010).
In a reversal of the liberatory opportunities envisaged by the proponents of choice from the women’s, gay, lesbian and queer communities, and others from the 1960s onwards, ‘choice’ has become (for many) under neoliberalism, not an exciting celebratory freedom, but as Salecl points out, a moral and economic weight which some conservative politicians and economic rationalists deploy to construct the argument that one must take responsibility for the entirety of one’s life. Whilst I acknowledge that there is a rich history of the struggle for choice in personal living arrangements worthy of scholarly attention, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to detail this struggle.

**The Discourse of Positive Thinking**

Barbara Ehrenreich (2009) investigates the neoliberal production of social values in her book *Smile or Die: How Positive Thinking Fooled America and the World*. Ehrenreich argues that the contemporary discourse of ‘positive thinking’, typified in popular self-help discourse, is an ideological force which “encourages us to deny reality, submit cheerfully to misfortune, and blame only ourselves for our fate” (Ehrenreich, 2009: 44). Ehrenreich identifies a pattern of positive thinking which is valorised across many aspects of American life. She draws on an example of workshops and support groups that middle-level corporate workers are invited to attend following retrenchment. The message disseminated within the workshops is that losing one’s job is a ‘growth opportunity’ and that improving one’s situation is contingent upon having a positive attitude (Ehrenreich, 2009: 45). This, Ehrenreich argues, is part of the wider belief that the difficulties people encounter are a product of their own negative attitudes (Ehrenreich, 2009: 119). Ehrenreich proposes that this belief is supported by a secular version of religious discourse within the
philosophy of positive thinking, which she argues is a primary element of neoliberalism. She argues that the discourse of positive thinking is to neoliberalism what Calvinism was to liberalism. By this she means that the harsh judgementalism of Calvinism which attributed inequality and disadvantage to individuals’ ‘sinful’ inclinations, is mirrored by the discourse of positive thinking which, equally callously, attributes inequality and disadvantage to individuals’ ‘negative’ attitudes (Ehrenreich, 2009: 90).

Ehrenreich illustrates the neoliberal relationship with religion by bringing attention to the dominant reverence for individual success within a number of popular evangelical movements, which promote the supersession of religious ideas about doing good deeds for less privileged people, with ideas about individual rewards for individual contact and relationship with God (Ehrenreich, 2009: 123). Ehrenreich argues that encouraging people who are unemployed or experiencing poverty or other difficulties to believe that all they have to do is improve their attitudes, is not only delusional and cruel, but has a powerful effect to repress dissent. She compares the culture of positive thinking to the ‘forced optimism’ fundamental to the discursive modalities of many totalitarian states, and argues that they each achieve equivalent effects of social control (Ehrenreich, 2009: 201). The discourse of positive thinking denies both social structure and collective power, and reinforces the neoliberal discourse of market fundamentalism. In other words, the widespread belief that the physical world can be manipulated and changed by the power of thought, is analogous to, and supportive of, the idea that it is unnecessary for governments to intervene and implement social planning or policies because market forces will eventually bring everything into order (Ehrenreich, 2009).
Nicolas Rose (1999) argues that the neoliberal rhetoric promises free access to opportunities for success, while at the same time, institutes within each individual a continuous self-doubt, and the requirement of perpetual self-analysis and assessment. Du Gay (1997) proposes that underpinning this continuous self-doubt is the conceptualisation of human life in fundamentally entrepreneurial terms, which allows for the individualisation of social problems. Understandings about the ‘duty’ to carry one’s own weight, and a framework which encourages people to feel responsible for, and thus burdened by, each other, places people under peer pressure to perform. This is accentuated by the language of responsible self-advancement which cultivates the perception that excluded or marginalised people or groups, are responsible for their situation through failing to conduct themselves in a suitably ‘entrepreneurial’ manner. De-institutionalisation and the re-individualisation of pathologies such as mental illness, homelessness, and unemployment diverts the responsibility and the blame for the difficulties that underprivileged, disadvantaged and disabled subjects encounter onto their own choices, which fall short of their moral duty to take care of themselves (du Gay, 1997: 302). Individuals are thus imagined to be personally responsible for themselves no matter what the social, personal, or economic circumstances of their lives, and they are represented as profligate burdens if they are not. The dominant neoliberal discourse thus incites social stigma and provides the understanding that one’s individual role in social life is something which can and should be controlled, scrutinised, and regulated through one’s own efforts (Rose, 1999: 231).
Stigma

Located within the Durkheimian tradition positing that all social structures discriminate between insiders and outsiders, Erving Goffman’s (1963) *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* is foundational to a large body of research on social stigma. Nearly fifty years later, it remains strongly influential in the current sociological paradigm. Stigma, in Goffman’s view, is a process that individuals learn through a ‘moral career’ which begins with developing an appreciation of societies’ norms, values and ideals. Goffman’s analysis of stigma is based on research with people who were the target of overt stigmatisation during the mid-twentieth century, such as those with disabilities or people defined as having ‘deviant’ lifestyles. Goffman brings attention to entrenched cultural assumptions around identity norms, and argues that stigma is embedded in the ‘language of relationships’ (Goffman, 1963: 15). Goffman suggests that because some social norms take the form of ideals that constitute standards from which nearly everyone falls short, almost everyone is at times likely to feel deficient and substandard in some way. Thus, people who occasionally feel insecure and those who constantly feel insecure exist on a continuum and stigma management is therefore a general feature of social interaction (Goffman, 1963: 155). Stigma can thus be understood as a pervasive two way social process in which every individual participates in either the role of the stigmatiser or the role of the stigmatised. For some individuals stigmatisation occurs only in some social interactions and in some stages of life, whereas for others it is endemic (Goffman, 1963: 164).

Following Goffman, there is broad agreement amongst today’s stigma theorists that stigma is socially constructed, contingent upon relationships and context, and that it
entails markers of difference which lead to a loss of status (Yang et al., 2007; Scambler, 2007, 2009; Major and O’Brien, 2005; Reidpath et al., 2005; King, Knight and Hebl, 2010). Theorists such as Link and Phelan (2001) have identified four practices as integral to the occurrence of stigma. These are labelling, stereotyping, cognitive distancing, and responding emotionally to difference. The effects of these processes on targets of stigma and the strategies stigmatised individuals or groups employ to manage them have been the focus of a myriad of studies (Leach, et al., 2010; Warren, 2010; Ashburn-Nardo, 2010; Jahoda, 2010; Chaudoir and Quinn, 2010; Kaiser and Wilkins, 2010; Link, et al., 2004). People’s appraisal and consequent rejection or acceptance and internalisation of the stigma they encounter have been shown to be somewhat dependent upon understandings and engagements with political ideologies, social hierarchies, and collective representations (Yang et al., 2007: 1526; Kaiser and Wilkins, 2010; Leach, et al., 2010). People who internalise stigma, therefore, are more likely to be those who do not enjoy high socio-economic status. Moreover, people who internalise stigma have been shown to be at risk of negative outcomes in areas of self-esteem, academic achievement, and personal health (Barreto and Ellemers, 2010; Scambler, 2006, 2007, 2009).

While people with physical disabilities are a key subject of Goffman’s study of stigma, he also includes unemployed people and ‘deviant’ groups such as criminals, drug users, and prostitutes. Despite this, his work has been widely interpreted to indicate that stigma infers a non-culpable falling short of cultural norms. This understanding of Goffman’s work has led to an analytic distinction between the concepts of stigma and deviance. Wherein stigma denotes an ontological deficit that
invokes shame, and deviance refers to a moral deficit invoking blame (Scambler, 2009: 450). Scambler argues that the work done under what has come to be known as the ‘personal tragedy/deviance paradigm’ needs to be sociologically extended because the framework hinging on the distinction between stigma and deviance most often overlooks the causal contributions of social structures like class, ethnicity, and gender (Scambler, 2009: 442). Stigma and deviance, Scambler suggests, can be inscribed on persons as well as embodied, while also existing in structured social relations (Scambler, 2009: 453). Stigmatisation, he points out, is rarely the only element of disadvantage (Scambler, 2009: 452). Scambler thus proposes that there is a need to reframe notions of the relationship between stigma and deviance, so as to incorporate the variable and changing dynamic between the cultural norms of shame and blame embedded in social structures (Scambler, 2009: 441).

Concurring with theorists such as Salecl (2003, 2008, 2010), Bone (2010), du Gay (1997) and Ehrenreich (2009), Scambler argues that the neoliberal rhetoric of choice is both an ideological apparatus which supports a profiteering consumerism, and a legitimating device which ascribes deviance to those who wilfully refuse to conform to cultural norms. Scambler’s work on health related stigma demonstrates that the rhetoric of choice is especially caustic for the less privileged as it pressures individuals to blame themselves for their exploitation, oppression and other forms of disadvantage such as physical and mental disability (Scambler, 2007: 301). Scambler argues that today, the logic of state regulation and social control have become synonymous with the rationale of free-market enterprise and economic class relations. As a consequence, entitlements which had formerly been conferred
by the welfare state have been eroded and displaced by a philosophy of ‘positive welfare’ where welfare benefits are contingent upon active participation in either the workforce or in training to join the workforce (Scambler, 2006: 285). Scambler proposes that the recent political rhetoric of social inclusion and emphasis on personal responsibility, has fostered a merger between the experience of shame associated with stigma and the experience of culpability associated with deviance (Scambler, 2006: 280).

Scambler illustrates the dynamic norms of shame and blame in contemporary social structures in his discussion of the former British government’s welfare-to-work programs. Structured around the insistence for personal responsibility and the premise that low employment contributes to the problems of poverty and social exclusion, the welfare-to-work programs implement strategies of educational, training and support services for disadvantaged people. Scambler argues that the philosophy of personal responsibility underpinning these programs can be understood in terms of the neoliberal reinvigoration of relations of class and control, and suggests that ostensible reduction in stigmatisation and any other supposed benefits gained from the opportunities, have to be set against the metamorphosis of participants’ shame around stigma into blame for their deviance (Scambler, 2006: 293-4). In other words, by recasting imperfection as immorality, measures implemented by the state to guard against ‘self-exclusion’ from workplace norms, require individuals to actively demonstrate that they are not culpably burdensome (Scambler, 2009: 451). Scambler argues that British people with disabilities are consequently increasingly blaming themselves for both congenital disabilities and
disabilities sustained during the course of life’s unavoidable circumstances (Scambler, 2006: 280).

Goffman points out that the term ‘stigma’ originally referred to visible burns or cuts which the Greeks inscribed on the bodies of community members with “bad moral character” (Goffman, 1963: 13). His work demonstrates that historically, divergent and ever-changing social strategies determine norms, values and exactly what constitutes moral transgression at any given time (Goffman, 1963: 165). Goffman defined three distinct types of stigma: the stigma associated with physical differences or disabilities; stigma linked with religious, ethnic, or national identities, and the stigma of moral transgressions (Goffman, 1963: 14). He suggests that the latter type functions as a means of formal social control. If not viewed as a fateful tragedy, people’s less than ideal social circumstances are likely to be the subject of moral stigmatisation and blamed on those who are seen to be wilfully thwarting social norms (Goffman, 1963: 153).

Although Scambler is making inroads into the theorising of moral stigmatisation, Goffman’s lead in this area does not appear to have been significantly followed in the vast body of more recent stigma theory. Yang et al., (2007) have developed Goffman’s suggestions in their article ‘Culture and Stigma: Adding moral experience to stigma theory’. Yang et al., follow Kleinman’s (2006) proposition that ‘moral experience’ is the dimension of life that identifies what matters most to people, and propose that stigma is a fundamentally moral issue. Kleinman argues that because everyday life is defined by people having something to gain or lose, such as employment, relationships, and status, everyday life is what matters most
for people. Yang et al., thus argue that stigma affects people by threatening the loss or diminution of the value of daily life, or actually demolishing that experienced value (Yang et al., 2007: 1532).

Yang and associates’ (2007) review of stigma research reveals that stigma has most often been conceptualised as an individual experience occurring within the stigmatised or the stigmatiser’s subjective space. They argue, conversely, that rather than occurring entirely within stigmatised or stigmatising individuals, stigma occurs in the inter-subjective space between people’s families and social networks — in the interpersonal exchanges through which the associated shame is recognised. They argue that stigma is a “moral-emotional” process because values influence an individual’s experience of emotions through the linguistic or visible symbols of stigma which connect the inner world of feelings to the social world of values (Yang et al., 2007: 1532). This connection between stigma and the inner world of feelings is an important concept within the context of this study because of what I will argue is a dynamic relationship between stigma and solo living.

**Solo Living**

David de Vaus and Helen Richardson’s (2009) analysis of solo living in Australia indicates that there is a clustering of one-person households into a large group with low income and another large group with high income, and this pattern is equally true amongst men and women. Particularly among those aged twenty to fifty-nine (De Vaus and Richardson, 2009: 17). The proportion of men living alone in Australia is fairly equal to that of women, but their age and educational profiles are notably different. Women who live alone tend to be among the most educated
bracket, while men who live alone tend to be less educated than average (De Vaus and Richardson, 2009: 14). Men who live alone are more likely to be employed in the ‘blue collar’ workforce or to not be participating in the workforce than men who live with others (De Vaus and Richardson, 2009: 19-21). Moreover, women living alone are more likely to be professionals and in the highest income group than women who live with others (De Vaus and Richardson, 2009: 19).

De Vaus and Richardson propose that gender differences in the role that education plays in solo living can be explained by the understanding that higher education tends to bring in higher income, enabling those with higher education to afford to live alone. They suggest that as a consequence of their education, women may be more confident about relying upon their own resources and managing their own lives. This capacity for independence may also increase ‘fussiness’ in partner choice, and some women may choose to live alone rather than settling for less than their ideal in partnership. Additionally, more educated, higher earning women, de Vaus and Richardson argue, are not as likely to be intimidated about leaving a less than ideal marriage and may be thus more likely than they were in the past to live alone (de Vaus and Richardson, 2009: 15). The conventional wage earner role of the male in marriage remains an endemic ideal in Australian society. However, due to the post-industrial decline in ‘blue collar’ employment, less educated men may be unable to meet this ideal and can find it difficult to earn the substantial wage that had once been available to them. This reduced status, according to de Vaus and Richardson, renders men less attractive marriage prospects than they were in the past. This unattractiveness is compounded by the tension between the cultural ideal
of ‘marrying up’ and the rise of women’s education (de Vaus and Richardson, 2009: 15).

In *Going Solo*, Eric Klinenberg (2012) proposes that because the rise of solo living is a phenomena occurring in most developed countries, but not in the “poor” ones, solo living can be understood as a “collective achievement” (Klinenberg, 2012: 212). By also contending that “living alone helps us pursue sacred modern values – individual freedom, personal control, and self-realisation” (Klinenberg, 2012: 18), Klinenberg implies that we are turning to solo living not only because we can afford to, but because it is seen to be good to do so. He argues that the social commentators and political spokespersons who raise concerns about the rise of solo living do not understand that solo living is an individual choice which is as legitimate as the choice to get married or live with a domestic partner (Klinenberg, 2012: 212). At the same time, however, Klinenberg concludes his book with the following two sentences:

Solitude, once we learn how to use it, does more than restore our personal energy; it also sparks new ideas about how we might better live together. No matter who we are or how we live at the moment, isn’t this our most pressing need? (Klinenberg, 2012: 233).

In concluding this way, Klinenberg contradicts his own work by suggesting that living together is “our most pressing need”. While he devotes much of his book to the benefits and positive aspects of solo living, Klinenberg simultaneously asserts that it is a “fact that neither individuals nor societies see living alone as a goal or end point” (Klinenberg, 2012: 212). This contradictory feature of Klinenberg’s work is pertinent within the context of this study because it reflects an ambivalence about solo living which is also described by the participants.
Ambivalence

Ingrid Connidis and Julie Anne McMullin (2002) develop the sociological concept of ambivalence and propose that ambivalence can be understood as “structurally created contradictions which are made manifest in interaction” (Connidis and McMullin, 2002: 558). They argue that whether from a psychological or sociological perspective, studies of ambivalence have invariably been focused at the individual level of subjective states and emotions (Connidis and McMullin, 2002: 561). In an endeavour to address this individual focus, Connidis and McMullin propose that when embedded in a theoretical framework that views social structure as structured social relations, and individuals as actors who exercise agency as they negotiate relationships within the contrains of social structure, ambivalence can be conceived as concurrently held contradictory feelings or emotions which result from countervailing expectations about how individuals should act. Social structural contradictions and paradoxes are therefore reproduced in interpersonal relationships and manifest in the experiences of individuals who make decisions about, and negotiate, courses of action. Connidis and McMullin argue that variability in individuals’ resources translate into variability in the options available to them for managing ambivalence, as constraints to managing ambivalence will be greater among those with fewer resources (Connidis and McMullin, 2002: 563).

Highlighting the relationship between individual action, human agency, and structured social relations, sociological ambivalence is an important bridging concept that links the ambivalence and conflict described by the participants of this study, to the contradictions between two dominant ideas: that on the one hand, citizens are autonomous individuals who should self-actualise through personal
choices, and yet, these autonomous individuals *ought to* enter into cohabiting coupled partnerships.

The “Ideology of Marriage and Family”

Bella DePaulo and Wendy Morris (2005) argue that the dominant idea that individuals should enter into cohabiting coupled partnerships is supported by the “ideology of marriage and family”\(^2\). They propose that the ‘ideology’ of marriage and family is a largely invisible and uncontested set of beliefs resting on a framework of assumptions about people who are involved in sexual partnerships. This framework is built around the premises that the sexual partnership is the one fundamentally important peer relationship, and that all people want to have a sexual partnership. This is supported by the assumptions that people who are involved in a sexual partnership are better and more valuable, worthy, and important, people, than those who are not. Furthermore, it is commonly assumed that those living in a sexual partnership are happier, less lonely, more mature and fulfilled, and their lives are probably more meaningful and complete (DePaulo and Morris, 2005: 58).

DePaulo and Morris argue that because the ‘ideology’ of marriage and family is virtually uncontested, it fosters the automatic and often invisible stigmatising of single people, which is at odds with contemporary sympathies and tolerance for diversity (DePaulo and Morris, 2005: 58). They propose that single people are stigmatised from the outset by the fourfold scheme of determining civil status. The categories of ‘divorced’, ‘widowed’, ‘never married’ and ‘married’ compels an

---

\(^2\) DePaulo and Morris use the term ‘ideology’, as do several other writers, several of whom engage to only a limited extent with the way people resist or make their own sense of these dominant social beliefs, mores and practices of marriage and family. However, in my findings I am concerned with analysing the discourses surrounding marriage and family and in unpacking the multiple ways participants take up or embrace or resist or make sense of them in their own lives.
account of why people are single by asking whether one is married, and if not, why not? People who are married, by contrast, are not required to explain whether or not they have been previously divorced or widowed. The fourfold scheme of civil status thus defines single people in deficit terms of what they are not (DePaulo and Morris, 2005: 58). Reviewing of some of the published scientific claims about the greater wellbeing of married people, DePaulo and Morris argue that the science behind these claims is influenced by the prevailing assumptions about marriage and family. They propose that the relationship between marital status and happiness is probably smaller and more conditional than is implied either by the dominant social beliefs or the claims of scientists (DePaulo and Morris, 2005: 65).

Reporting on a study they conducted with around a thousand American college students, DePaulo and Morris conclude that participants were likely to describe married people as happy, loving, secure, kind, caring, giving, faithful, loyal, compromising, reliable, mature, and dependent. When describing singles, by contrast, the students were likely to imagine that single people were lonely, shy, unhappy, insecure, inflexible, flirtatious, self-centred, envious, and probably looking for a partner. On the upside, singles were more likely than married people to be thought of as sociable, friendly and fun (DePaulo and Morris, 2005: 61-2). In a similar study, Conley and Collins (2002) found that married people were perceived to be less likely to have a sexually transmitted infection or HIV than single people, who were seen as having riskier character traits such as promiscuity (DePaulo and Morris, 2005: 62). DePaulo and Morris suggest that the stigma associated with being single differs from many other stigmas because it varies across the life cycle. They propose that people develop into the stigma of being single by virtue of
reaching an age at which it is expected that they should be married (DePaulo and Morris, 2005: 60). They found that singles are perceived more negatively at forty years old than at twenty-five, and that women who are ‘late’ in marrying are apt to be judged particularly severely (Krueger et al., 1995; DePaulo and Morris, 2005: 70).

DePaulo and Morris argue that the contemporary “funnelling of intimacy” (Cohen, 1992), almost exclusively into the couple, frames marriage and family as the one good and moral path (Kluegel and Smith, 1986; DePaulo and Morris, 2005: 77). They propose that the ideology of marriage and family functions within the interpersonal realm in the same way the ideology of the secularised Protestant Work Ethic functions within the sphere of socio-economic status. By fostering the belief that status inequalities are the result of differences in hard work and merit, and that socio-economic status is permeable and status and power differences are thus valid and just, the neoliberal doctrine of personal responsibility offers a rationale for iniquity. In the same way, the ‘ideology’ of marriage and family offers a rationale for less than ideal results which protects the institution of marriage and insulates it from criticism. For example, if marriages do not survive, there is a given framework which allows the breakdown of the marriage to be interpreted as a mistake in the selection of one’s true love. For example, ‘We just weren’t right for each other’ or ‘We didn’t try hard enough’. So in the same way that people employed in unskilled labour are encouraged to believe they need to work harder to get ahead, single people are encouraged to believe they can and should improve themselves to become more marriageable. By losing weight, for example, or seeking experts’ or self-help advice on how to improve themselves. Thus the onus bears down on the
individual while the structure escapes critical scrutiny (DePaulo and Morris, 2005: 77).

**Summary**

In this chapter I have briefly discussed a selection of scholars’ ideas about the structural and social changes of the past forty years or so. I have shown how theorists have linked the trend towards solo living with changing demographic trends, individualisation, and the neoliberal restructuring of both the public and private realm. I highlighted the ideas that as people have become displaced from stable and local social networks through the fragmentation of modern institutions, and immersed in the cultural economy, the bonds between contemporary individuals and traditional loyalties to constructs such as social class, locality, family, places of employment, and community have become increasingly tenuous. People have thus become more self-conscious and reflexive, experiencing a greater degree of life in terms of choices and individual decisions (Jamieson, 2009: 1.5). Loyal and long service to specific workplaces no longer earns employees a guarantee of employment and people are increasingly required to manage short-term relationships while migrating between places of employment and geographical locations. It is within this social context that the trend towards living alone is, in very broad terms, theorised in one of two ways: either as a symptom of decreasing connections between people which is therefore threatening to family life and social solidarity (Bellah et al., 1985; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; Putnam, 2000; Bauman, 2003), or conversely, it is read as a liberating change that democratises personal life. In this latter viewpoint solo living does not decrease interpersonal relations, but rather, creates new and democratic foundations from which equal
relationships can be sustained (Giddens, 1992; Becker and Charles, 2006; Roseneil, 2007; Budgeon, 2008). I also highlighted a third position in this debate which is advanced by theorists such as Jamieson (2010), who argue that the transformation of the intimate realm is overstated and that Bauman, Beck and Giddens’ use of “reflexive individualism” to interpret change in the private realm caricatures this change, instead of offering realistic insight into how people understand and experience their lives (Jamieson, 2009: 1.8).

In this chapter I also have discussed various theorists’ ideas about neoliberal modes of government and subjectification, and the ways in which market mechanisms and enterprise models are applied to all forms of action, including the conduct of government, the conduct of traditionally non-economic organisations such as public schools, universities and hospitals, and the behaviour of individuals, who, above all else, are represented as choosing, enterprising, independent, subjects (du Gay, 1997; Rose, 1996, 1999). I have demonstrated that neoliberal moral prescriptions are disseminated through a framework of several interconnected discourses. These include, the discourse of ‘enterprise’, which cultivates the perception that people are individually responsible for their own welfare, and marginalised people or groups are irresponsible (du Gay, 1997). Additionally, the discourse of choice encourages people to believe that individuals choose their place in the social structure, and pressures individuals to blame themselves for their exploitation, oppression and other forms of disadvantage (Scambler, 2007; Salecl, 2010). Furthermore, the discourse of positive thinking persuades people to attribute individuals’ prosperity, or hardship, to their positive or negative attitudes (Ehrenreich, 2009), and finally,

3 The term ‘reflexive individualism’ refers to the ‘psychic’ or lived experience of individualism. In Chapter Three I discuss John Bone’s (2010) work which draws on ‘neurosociology’ to explore the ways in which social structural factors produce psychological experiences.
the dominant discourse of marriage and family, which perpetuates the belief that getting married is the one truly respectable and moral path (DePaulo and Morris, 2005).

In this chapter I have introduced Goffman’s (1963) theory of social stigma and some recent interpretations of how stigma operates in the neoliberal environment (Yang et al., 2007; Scambler, 2006, 2007, 2009; Major and O’Brien, 2005; Reidpath et al., 2005; King, Knight and Hebl, 2010). I have pointed to the ways in which the neoliberal discourse encourages the stigmatisation of individuals for their less than ideal circumstances (Scambler, 2006, 2007, 2009), and how living alone is constructed as a less than ideal circumstance (DePaulo and Morris, 2005). I have also drawn attention to the sociological concept of ambivalence, which highlights the interface between individual action, human agency, and structured social relations. Finally, I have flagged the fact that within the scope of this thesis, I use the concept of sociological ambivalence as a central bridging theory which enables me to link the ambivalence described by the participants, to structural paradox. In the following chapter I detail the methodological approach I have employed to unravel how the contradiction between the discourse of choice and the dominance of the institution of marriage and family manifests in the respondents’ narratives.
Chapter Two - Methodology

Introduction

In the previous chapter I introduced the various theoretical positions which have been advanced to explain the significant increase in the number of one-person households over the past forty years or so. I demonstrated that solo living is most often equated with the growing individualisation of society and outlined the three essential positions within the debate. One position is proffered by theorists including Bauman (2001, 2003, 2005), Putnam (2000), Bellah et al., (1985), and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) who suggest that the move towards living alone is symptomatic of a crisis of intimacy and the atomisation of the social world. A further position is taken by theorists such as Giddens (1992), Becker and Charles (2006), Roseneil (2007), and Budgeon (2008), who propose that the trend towards living alone is indicative of the democratisation of the private realm. The third position is advanced by theorists such as Jamieson (1999, 2009, 2010) who argues that changes in the private realm are overstated and Beck, Bauman and Giddens’ use of reflexive individualism to theorise the trend towards solo living, adds very little to understandings of the experience of living alone (Jamieson, 2009: 1.8).

Lynn Jamieson argues that people who live alone are neither a homogeneous group nor a discrete population which is distinct in characteristics or practises from those who live with others. She makes the case that solo living is analytically distinct from being single, and because the two are often conflated, there is a need to study solo living within the age brackets typically associated with cohabiting with a
partner. The conflation of being single and solo living which Jamieson identifies within the academic literature is mirrored in the stories of the people I interviewed. While another cohort of interviewees may have included many people who were involved in conjugal partnerships, the vast majority of the people I interviewed were not, at the time of our interviews, involved in partnerships. Because of this, and because of the contemporary discursive entanglement of ‘coupleness’ and cohabitation, it is often very difficult, if not impossible, to disentangle the issues of being single from those of living alone in the participants’ stories.

Jamieson suggests that understandings of solo living would benefit from further research which focuses on a comparison between genders, socio-economic contexts and cultural circumstances. She advocates in-depth qualitative work exploring the significance of solo living for people’s sense of self, including a focus on solo living as a distinct site for practices of intimacy and friendship (Jamieson, 2009: 6.1). Taking Jamieson’s lead, my primary aim for this project is to investigate the personal implications of the move toward one-person households, to develop an understanding of how people who live alone construct and maintain intimacy, and to critically examine the existing macro theory to determine its relevance to the understandings and experiences of men and women who live alone in contemporary Australia.

**My Analytic Approach**

The analytic approach I have taken is drawn from a combination of sociological, constructivist feminist, and cultural theories. I have embraced existing social theories, yet rather than condemning or accepting their precepts, I have endeavoured
to analyse, examine and question them. Methodologically, I draw in particular on Foucault’s (1982, 1980, 1979, 1978) theoretical insights into the development of history, the constitution of human subjectivity, and processes of power, regulation and control; and constructivist feminist theory, which challenges the concept of a singular or universal truth and the methods operationalised to verify or falsify ‘truth’ (Gross, 1986: 199). Discourse analysis is both textual and contextual, and in using this method of data analysis, I have paid attention to both the manifest content of the text and the ideology of popular and entrenched discourse within it. I have read participants’ narratives, not as true or false accounts of ‘reality’, but with an emphasis upon the way versions of the world, society, events, and subjectivity are produced in discourse (Silverman, 2006: 224). Within my analysis, I will address questions that are concurrently personally, politically and academically significant (Naples, 2003: 13), with an emphasis upon the way participants reproduce and resist the social stigma that is commonly experienced by people who live alone.

Foucauldian Discourse

Because the term discourse is somewhat ambiguous, it is important to define its Foucauldian use in the context of this discourse analysis. Foucault (1980) argues that by establishing ‘facts’ and producing the technologies of regulation, the human sciences are intricately involved in the procedures and maintenance of political power. He posits that for the efficient manipulation of their human assets, states require both a volume of information and its bureaucratic administration, and he sees that the human body is a key apparatus from which this ‘information’ is derived. Institutions measure, control and regulate information, and in turn, enable discourses pertaining to the constitution of a ‘normal’ and ‘healthy’ citizen
The resulting discourse regarding what constitutes ‘abnormal’ or ‘unhealthy’ citizens, provides a powerful social directive. Foucault calls this self-regulating directive “biopower” and argues that individuals’ perceptions, behaviours, values, aspirations, reactions, and ultimately their ‘selves’, are a production of the discourse generated within modern institutions.

Foucault argues that the enlightenment’s democratic edict created a power vacuum into which biopower insinuated itself, and in so doing, high-jacked the enlightenment’s ideals and promises (Foucault, 1978: 143). Foucault contends that the covert nature of self-regulating biopower effectively ensures the state’s ability to take maximum advantage of its human assets. He uses the example of the prison to demonstrate the way biopower functions to dominate and mould people into more productive individuals. While the old system of power relied on terror to maintain obedience, within the reformed ‘enlightened’ system, the theatrical elements of punishment were removed, and punishment became understood as a corrective process for unhealthy, unproductive, and unprofitable individuals (Foucault, 1979: 25). The punishment that was once inflicted upon the body, now became imposed upon the mind; the views, the will, the feelings and the tendencies of people. Foucault argues that “[judges had] taken to judging something other than crimes, namely, the ‘soul’ of the criminal” (Foucault, 1979: 19). Through the arranging and ordering of every minute detail of prison life, prisoners became ‘docile’, and convinced that state power was ubiquitous and inescapable. Foucault demonstrates with his study of the structure of the modern prison, that the effectiveness of biopower results from its inevitability as opposed to its visible intensity (Foucault, 1979: 9). In other words, power became intrinsically and covertly enmeshed within
the structure of modern life, and warders, doctors, chaplains, psychiatrists, psychologists, and educationalists, took over where the executioner left off (Foucault, 1979: 11). Schools, universities, hospitals, courts, business and the police force, keep us under surveillance some of the time, and we take it upon ourselves the rest of the time. Modern power applies itself directly within everyday life. It defines the individual, differentiates him or her by their personality, connects them to their own identity, and enforces a law of truth on them. No one escapes the all-pervasive biopower. We all want to ‘get away from it all,’ but ‘it’ comes with us. ‘It’ is us.

Biopower renders citizens subjects in both senses of the word: subjugated and subject to (Foucault, 1982: 212). Foucault argues that objectifying trends and subjectifying practices are instrumental in forming the modern individual as both subject and object. He proposes that to gain emancipation from the individualisation that has been imposed by the state for the past few centuries, we need to promote and enable new types of subjectivities (Foucault, 1982: 216). Foucault encourages resistance to the state’s simultaneously individualising and totalising form of power (Foucault, 1982: 213), and points to what he calls ‘reverse discourse’ as an avenue to achieve this objective:

Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it (Foucault, 1978: 101).

What Foucault has called ‘reverse discourse’ is illustrated in the collective identification of marginalised subjectivities which ‘thwart’ modern power by gaining social strength or legitimacy (Foucault, 1978: 101). The operation of reverse discourse, or resistance, is also an object of study within constructivist
feminist modes of discourse analysis. Deborah Lupton (1992) argues that discourse analysis is an ideal academic method for understanding and producing resistance because it allows an identification of cultural hegemony and the ways in which it is reproduced. In doing so, discourse analysts can reveal the implicit means by which cultural hegemony is established, maintained and often hidden within popular and official discourse. Discourse analysts can thus potentially challenge the status quo because they are concerned with both the manifest content of the text and the reproduction of discourse, as well as the more subtle forms of control and manipulation within the inherent meanings of popular and entrenched discourse (Lupton, 1992: 149).

**Constructivist Feminist Theory**

In many ways aligned with Foucault, constructivist feminist theorists acknowledge the productive investments of power in the production of knowledge and propose that the notion of objective ‘truth’ ignores political investments in ‘truth’. The gaps, silences and absences which function to structure and make dominant discourses possible, and the complicity of discursive systems with oppressive social structures are therefore a central focus of constructivist feminist theory. Power is investigated by constructivist feminist theorists as a force visible in gendered acts, events and processes within political and public life, and as a sequence of strategic alignments between institutions, knowledge, and practises occupied with the control and regulation of individuals and groups. In recognising the limits, historicity, socio-economic and political values of researchers, constructivist feminist theorists challenge the socio-economic domination of forms of learning, training, knowledge and theory by disputing the notion of the disembodied, rational, gender-neutral
subject of knowledge. Orthodox concepts of objectivity, observer-neutrality and context-independence are based upon assumptions about the impartial subjectivities of ‘trained’ researchers and ignore the structural positions which individuals inhabit, whereas a constructivist feminist approach openly acknowledges that theoretical positions are specific to observer and context (Gross, 1986: 200). Proponents of discourse analysis such as Lupton (1992) do not claim that their findings are universal, objective truth, but rather, they recognise that the speaking subject is inexorably positioned within a socio-political context. In response to positivist claims that discourse analysis is ‘too subjective’, Lupton argues that norms of judgement are supported by the analyst’s coherent demonstration of the inter-subjective shared effects and functions of the particular discourses at play. Validity is also established through the comprehensive use of the actual textual data in the written analysis, which allows readers to evaluate the analyst’s reasoning process from data to conclusion (Lupton, 1992: 148). Constructivist feminist theorists bring the distinction between objective ‘knowledge’ and subjective ‘opinion’ into question, as a constructivist feminist conceptualisation of knowledge is as neither subjective or objective nor absolute or relative (Gross, 1986: 199). Constructivist feminist theorists question the binary mode of categorisation and attempt to develop alternatives to the inflexible, hierarchical and exclusive concept of reason. Constructivist feminists seek a rationality which is based upon, instead of divided from, experience, oppression, particularity and specificity (Gross, 1986: 200). In a refusal to accept the pre-given values of truth, objectivity, neutrality, universality, and an abstract reason, constructivist feminist theorists are not committed to or motivated by these values. Constructivist feminism is thus a critical and constructive strategy. It is both a theoretical practice and a site where dominant and
subjugated discourses, silenced or excluded voices, structures of coercion and control, and forms of resistance are examined in relation to each other (Gross, 1986: 202).

My Discourse Analysis

Following the constructivist feminist approach to discourse analysis, throughout my research I aim to represent the largely silent issue of solo living and give voice to those who live alone. By looking for patterns and themes in the texts, consistency and differences in the content and form of accounts, shared features, and the function and consequences of accounts, I have paid attention to the discourse that participants invoke in their narratives of solo living. In doing so, I endeavour to discern and develop an understanding of the meaning of solo living, both for individual participants, and in the wider culture. As I have mentioned, when I initially embarked upon this investigative project, I sought to ascertain the manner in which people aged between thirty and fifty-five who are currently living alone and have done so for a period of three years or more, structure their lives to meet their needs for emotional, social, and physical intimacy. I anticipated that this particular demographic, with their extensive experience of living alone, would have discovered and developed methods for constructing social frameworks to meet their needs for intimacy. For this reason, people who had lived alone for less than three years, and who may have been within a transitional and short-lived phase of their lives, were excluded from the study, as were people under thirty years of age and over fifty-five. Those under thirty were excluded due to the significant bodies of research that presently exist on the typically transitional lifestyles of adults aged under thirty (Jamieson et al., 2002: 5), and more recently, on their propensity to
remain living at home with their parents (Nilan, 2007: 114). Additionally, the substantial scholarly investigation previously undertaken to discern the situation of elderly people living alone, provided my rationale for the exclusion of adults over fifty-five (Perren et al., 2004; Michael et al., 2001; Victor et al., 2000; Thompson and Krause, 1998).

**Recruitment and Response**

Recruitment was undertaken via a process of self-selecting purposive sampling through media and press coverage of the study. Within half an hour of the University of Adelaide issuing a media release, my email inbox began to fill and the phones began to ring. Newspapers and radio stations all over Australia interviewed me and many of the radio interviews were followed up by talkback sessions on the topic of solo living. It seemed that people really wanted to talk about it. Many people who did not fit the criteria emailed or called me to discuss solo living after they had heard my interviews. Some were so happy that someone was talking about it that they rang to thank me and to offer their encouragement. Others were disappointed or angry about being excluded by the criteria. Either way, they expressed a clear sense of relief that the issue of solo living was receiving public representation. Relative to the complex task I had anticipated recruitment might be, willing participants were numerous and were selected from offers that came in abundance. Eligible female participants were far more available than males however, because many of the men who contacted me were single fathers or ‘half-time’ fathers and not therefore living alone, or not doing so continually. From the range of eligible respondents, I selected a sample of people on the basis of gender and age with the intent of evenly representing women and men across the age range.
of the sample. I wrote back to the volunteers whom I could not accommodate and asked permission to use their words in the study, and without exception, people were willing to contribute. Although I did not realise it at the time, the themes from this early communication with solo living individuals foreshadow the themes that would emerge in the subsequent interviews.

The following quotations, selected from the emails I received in response to the media release, depict the predominant relief that people expressed upon learning through the media coverage that solo living is not as unusual as they had thought it was:

I know several single people who are happier with their lot in life now that they are aware that singles living alone are on the increase. In some ways that is kind of comforting - knowing that I am not the only female of a certain age in a similar demographic - I don't feel like such a 'freak'.

It was funny in a way, to find it reassuring that there are many others in the same boat.

It has seemed to me that I was an outcast and oddity for living alone all these years.

The deeply entrenched discourse that living alone is ‘unusual’ or renders one an ‘oddity’, which is so clear in this early communication, would become even clearer throughout the interviews and, as the following chapters demonstrate, go on to constitute one of the central themes of this analysis.

People who were upset or angry about being excluded by the criteria often felt that they had a valuable contribution to make to the study and sometimes argued that the exclusion criteria was unreasonable. Upon reflection, they may have been right. As the years progress, I develop the appreciation that to be over fifty-five is hardly to
be elderly, however, at the time I designed the parameters of the sample, I aimed to target those in what I perceived to be their ‘middle’ years. The following comment is typical of those I received from people who felt left out by the age parameters I had set:

Although I am 68 and outside your criteria for the survey, I would like to say that I was living alone in my thirties and again in my 50/60's.

As if to affirm their own understandings, many people contacted me simply to agree that there are indeed many people who live alone:

I'm fascinated by the trend toward more single households, and I know so many people who live alone that it doesn't actually seem all that unusual.

I am 46 and live alone as do most of my friends these days. If you ever came to meet me at my job, I could probably point out another dozen or so men in their mid 30's-early 50's in the same or similar circumstances. All good men who earn excellent wages.

Numerous others wrote to say how interested they were in the research and to express a desire to read the final results:

I'm hoping it will be publicly released, as it would be great to read it when completed.

If I cannot help you with your study, I would still be very interested in the results you gather.

I would indeed be delighted to be on the mailing list, and even more interested to see your results and conclusions.

All in all, the recruitment process brought my attention to the common sentiment that it is high time conversation about solo living entered the public arena. It is intended and hoped, therefore, that this study will contribute to that conversation.
The Respondents and The Interviews

Among others, represented in the final sample of twenty-one female and twenty male volunteers, are students, administrators, army personnel, doctors, scientists, pensioners, academics, accountants, public servants, media personalities, tradespeople, and unemployed people. Although respondents represent the entire spectrum of income brackets, they tend to be, but are certainly not always, educated and salaried homeowners who do not have children and have never been married. They are also predominantly Anglo and heterosexual. Just over half have lived alone for ten years or more, with a quarter of these, living alone for 20 years or more. Of the half who have lived alone for less than ten years, over three quarters had lived alone for more than five years at the time of our interviews. Conducting interviews with respondents almost every day for an eight-week period during the latter part of 2008, I paid attention to creating a welcoming and informal atmosphere by setting a small tea party on the round table in the office at the university where our conversations took place. A number of participants had heard about the study through hearing me interviewed on radio. Typically, radio announcers asked about the questions I was planning to explore with respondents, which gave some participants a chance to consider their responses before we met. Some people consequently came along to the interviews with a pre-planned agenda of points they wanted to make. When we did meet, after a brief and informal chat, I started each interview by asking ‘Could we start by you telling me the whole story about you living alone? About how you came to be living alone, how you like it, its pros and cons from your point of view and anything else you’d like to mention about it?’ This open-ended style of questioning allowed respondents greater rein to

---

4 I have included an appendix providing a brief biography of each of the respondents which begins on Page 251.
speak about what was personally meaningful to them about solo living (Poynton and Lee, 2000: 5; Berg, 1998: 61). Some people used this opportunity to talk for the entire ninety minutes allocated for the interview, and others answered this first question briefly, tending to rely upon my agenda for prompts. I utilised in-depth, semi-standardised interviews because it is argued that by conducting the interview as a ‘conversational encounter’, discourse analysts are able to delve below the surface of the text and critically reveal the ideologies and meanings submersed therein (Lupton, 1992: 146). My preset lines of inquiry were designed to investigate what people see as the advantages and disadvantages of living alone; whether they see themselves to be living alone by choice; how they structure their sex and social lives; whether they see themselves living alone in the long-term; whether they experience solo living as lonely, and whether they feel stigmatised because they live alone. The interviews were audio recorded which provided both the opportunity to give respondents my full attention during the interviews and a precise record of each interview (Marvasti, 2004: 21). I then transcribed each interview verbatim, which enabled me to become familiar with the narratives of each individual, read them as text, and begin the process of identifying the common themes and meanings.

In short, my methodological approach is a hybrid of qualitative thematic, and discourse, analysis. In a two stage process I commenced by coding the interview texts and identifying the common themes in the participant’s narratives. This allowed me to construct a clear picture of the overriding themes. I then undertook a Foucauldian discourse analysis to unearth the underlying discourses which were submersed in the overriding themes and to reveal how these discourses were utilised by the participants.
Summary

In this chapter I have discussed Foucault’s theoretical insight into the configuration of human subjectivity and processes of power, regulation and control. I have indicated that Foucault’s ideas about how power constitutes discourse, which in turn, constitutes subjectivity, inform my constructivist feminist approach to discourse analysis and provide my overarching approach to framing the question of how people who live alone construct and maintain social connectedness and intimacy. By viewing identity as multiple, contradictory, partial and strategic, and individuals as representing a consortium of conflicting social, linguistic, and political forces, throughout this analysis I will read respondents’ narratives as both expressive and ideological. Throughout the following chapters I endeavour to represent the various different experiences and modes of solo living expressed by participants. At the same time, the manifest text reveals a complex web of contradictions. Following Richard Sennett’s (2006) contention that contractions in participants’ narratives are not unreliable or flawed reporting, but rather an expression of the subjective experience of social complexity, and drawing on the concept of sociological ambivalence, I will pay equal attention to the common ambiguities, contradictions and ambivalence within participants’ narratives. The following chapters thus explore the multi-layered, complex and competing discourses pertaining to contemporary solo living, and the links between those discourses and the everyday lives of people who live alone.
Section Two

The Social Context
Chapter Three - The Choice to Live Alone

Introduction

This chapter begins to explore the complexities and challenges of living alone in a neoliberal social environment which rewards independence and autonomy and sanctions the notion that people’s personal lives and living arrangements ought to be a free choice, while simultaneously anticipating conformity to established coupled norms. In this chapter I demonstrate that the majority of participants reflect the dominance of the overt neoliberal discourse around individuals’ personal choices by framing their solo living as a free and personal choice. At the same time, the more implicit and deeply embedded social expectation to conform to cohabiting coupled norms is revealed in people’s acceptance of, or deflection of, the responsibility associated with not doing so. Participants reveal that they feel framed by social dynamics that position them as somehow at fault and responsible for their non-conformity with coupled norms. They therefore feel required to legitimate their positions in some way in order resist stigma. Stigma, in the postmodern era is a contestable and elusive but nonetheless strongly present reality in the lives of the majority of participants. Stigma around non-conformity with coupled norms is a dynamic component of relationships with families, social groups, workplaces, and the self, but the stigma is most often implicit, deeply embedded in discursive values, and obscured by the dominant rhetoric surrounding individual choice. The very notion of stigma is at odds with contemporary understandings of fluid and multiple identities and free choices, and people’s stories are thus characterised by continual negotiation of the tension between socially approved personal choices and the
stigma associated with living alone. This chapter begins to demonstrate that in some ways, the stigma associated with living alone is less about living alone than it is about the inability to choose otherwise. By perpetually balancing and weighing stigma against social success and constructing solo living as a chosen and ideal status, participants’ narratives work to resolve structural ambivalence.

Respondents invariably set up living alone in contrast to being in relationships. The extent to which individuals are able to depict their solo living as a clear and positive contrast to cohabiting relationships tends to be somewhat contingent upon their access to resources that enable socially approved choices, and upon the preferential status they award to their solo living arrangements. I have grouped participants into four categories according to their preference of living arrangements. Of the four categories, one consists of nine people who describe living alone as their choice and their first preference. These people often draw relatively straightforward contrasts between the positive elements of living alone and the negative elements of coupled norms and confidently accept the responsibility for their solo living status. Comparatively, most other respondents draw more complex and ambivalent pictures and often simultaneously accept and divert the responsibility for their non-compliance with the coupled norm. A further category is made up of eighteen people who describe living alone as their choice and second preference to cohabiting with an as yet unmet partner. For these people, although solo living is chosen, the choice is contextualised in the absence of a partner, and the construction of an autonomous and choosing self becomes more difficult when taking into account the largely uncontrollable and contingent dimensions of a desired future relationship. Another category comprises eight people who describe living alone as
circumstantial rather than a choice. While these people frame living alone as circumstantial, they tend to demonstrate the pressure on individuals to perceive their situation in life as the result of personal choices. They often account for their living arrangements as a result of the motivations for making ‘bad’ choices and describe a distinct sense of personal culpability. Often, they would prefer to cohabit than live alone. The final group is made up of six people who describe living alone as being both the result of circumstances over which they had little control, combined with their personal choices. These people tend to report similar levels of satisfaction about living alone as those who choose solo living as their first or second preference. This last group, in particular, offer insight into some common pathways participants have followed into solo living.

**Living Alone is My Choice and My First Preference**

Adele, who has lived alone for ten years, provides an example of the people who chose living alone as their first preference. Adele is a high achieving professional in her mid-forties who describes intense involvements in her fields of professional and personal interest. When I asked her whether she lived alone by choice she answered:

Oh I can say it’s completely personal choice. I had a couple of horrifying experiences where I could have been married where I had to quickly go ‘Ah’ and run away. So I could have chosen to marry but that would have been like hell on earth. We would have broken up and it would have been all of my fault. I never wanted to, and I’ve never lived with a man. I’ve never been marital relationship prone. So this is all one-hundred percent my own making (Adele).

Adele enthusiastically accepts ‘one-hundred percent’ responsibility for her situation and clearly states that she chooses living alone above marriage, which she is at liberty to reject, and that for her, living alone is ideal. This construction of the ideal is successful if people can present themselves as ‘marriageable’. Because Adele
describes having had the chance to marry, and refusing it as a ‘horrifying’ prospect, she verifies that she has chosen her ideal. Thus, characteristically for people who choose living alone as their first and unequivocal preference, Adele negotiates the presence of stigma around non-compliance with coupled norms by depicting her life as ideal and positioning herself as in control of her single status. She told me about a conversation that she had with a friend which illustrates this approach:

She said to me like last year or the year before, she said ‘Oh I’m so worried for you’ [laughs]. And I mean, I’d just come back from a fabulous trip in Paris and I’ve got a fabulous job and a promotion, and it’s like [laughs], it’s just a different way to look at the world. So when people say, you know, they feel worried and stuff [about me living alone], well it’s hardly anyone, but when people do say it, I usually laugh. Not in their face, but, I’ll be, ‘Okay’, thinking ‘Oh you poor thing, look who you have to go home with’ (Adele).

By situating her own position as preferable to the coupled norm, Adele contrasts living alone with being in a relationship and unambiguously describes it as a free choice, her first preference, and the ideal. Ivy, who is in her early-fifties, locates herself in a similar position. Ivy has lived alone for five years following a thirty-year marriage from which she has two adult children and is also a high achieving professional. Her description of arriving home after work encapsulates the shared attitude of people who choose living alone as their first preference:

When I walk in the door there’s that ‘Ah’ feeling that this is mine. I made it up, and I built it, and it’s my choice, and it’s not checked against any other person. So it is an external reflection of me (Ivy).

Adele and Ivy clearly love living alone and have unambiguous plans to continue doing so for the rest of their lives. For others who frame living alone as their first choice, such as Wal, the picture is not quite as clear. Wal is a professional in his early-fifties and has lived alone in various world cities for the past twenty-seven years. While he fervently maintains that solo living is ideal, at the same time he
imagines that if by chance he happened to meet an ideal person, cohabitation could also be ideal:

The time that Russel shared the spare room, as I said it was ten months or so, but it just seemed like weeks. And if I could find a woman like that, it would be fantastic (Wal)

Could it be a guy? (Ruthie)

If I had the same sort of relationship I had with Russell. Yeah, that’s definitely a possibility. I’d prefer it would be a woman though. I could definitely share under that kind of situation. This was just a once off person, but I’d never run into anyone else with a personality like his (Wal).

Here, Wal is focusing on the ‘house-mate’ relationship he previously experienced rather than a cohabiting romantic partnership, and although he would prefer this to be a heterosexual sharing, his description does not seek to conform to the cohabiting coupled norm in the full sense. Sonny, who is in her late-forties and has lived alone for ten years, describes a similar position:

Every now and then you think, ‘Oh it would be nice to have a partner’, but if I had to have a choice, like, what would suit me would be a part time partner [laughs]. Yeah, that would be the ideal solution. Like someone that worked on a mine site, that’s away for two weeks and home for two weeks, that would be absolutely ideal. But no, I really enjoy pottering around. I enjoy, you know, I can choose to get up really early, or I can choose to have a lay in. I can, yeah (Sonny).

Some people who choose living alone as their first preference turn their lived realities into the ideal, which they contrast against their perceptions of less than ideal coupled norms. Others, like Wal and Sonny, negotiate the stigma of non-conformance with coupled norms by participating in the prevailing and positive model of coupled relationships. Here, it is the perfect and abstract ideal image of the coupled norm that simultaneously exists alongside the ideal picture of lived reality. Wal and Sonny work to keep both these positive images afloat despite their apparent incompatibility. In doing so, they defuse stigma by verifying that they are not eccentric isolates bereft of desire to partake in coupled norms.
Wal also presents himself as the ‘type’ of person who is not suited to cohabiting:

I mean obviously in Myers Briggs\(^5\) I’m pretty well introverted, as in, I go internal to [make] any decisions I want to broach or whatever. So I have my own little world I can go into at a moment’s notice and stay there for hours at a time and not get bored or lonely or whatever (Wal).

Integral to neoliberal individualism, is the discourse of individual psychology, which also exists in tension with the cultural imperative to desire and achieve romantic partnership. As Wal does, people often draw on this contradiction to legitimate their position. Utilising the construct of personality types supports the assertion that living alone is a personal choice at the same time as it averts responsibility associated with the failure to conform to cohabiting norms. Karen who is in her early-thirties and is an administrator who has lived alone for three years, uses this same method:

So, my whole needing my own space thing, like I’m an introverted kind of person, so that is just my personality (Karen).

Discourses of individual psychology function to legitimate personal difference and as I will illustrate in Chapter Nine, introversion is a significant theme in people’s stories. Karen’s framing of solo living as her first preference is notably different from others who choose living alone as their first preference in its stark and unambiguous contradictions. Karen presents as bright, positive and in control, and was diagnosed with depression during a painful separation with a former partner six years prior to our interview. As she told her story about living alone she said:

I bought my place last September. I love it. I’ll never live with anyone again. I love it.

When I asked her if living alone was her choice she answered:

\(^5\) The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator is a psychometric questionnaire based on Carl Jung and Isabel Briggs Myers’ typological approach to measuring psychological preferences in how people perceive the world and make decisions (Myers & Briggs Foundation Home, 2012, http://www.myersbriggs.org/my-mbti-personality-type/mbti-basics/).
Personal choice, definitely. I would do anything to not have to live with someone again I think.

Then later, when I inquired into her ideal future, she told me:

I don’t think ‘If things were different’ because they’re not. They’re the way they are. Deal with it [laughs]. But that’s part of my depression as well, you know, the more you hope and the more you get excited and the more you wish, the more you feel discontented and disappointed and unhappy. It doesn’t serve me any purpose at all to be like that... So I think it’s very much that I choose to think this way, yeah, for my own health. That’s all the stuff that let me spiral where I was, you know, ‘If life were different’. I mean, I’m not against dreaming, and if it’s stuff that’s within your control, it’s a good thing, but if you’re hanging your heart and your life on stuff which is completely out of your hands, I don’t see how that helps you. I really don’t. If someone came along, he would have to be pretty convincing. I’m not going to turn around and fall head-over-heels and it would have to be pretty ongoing. Like it would take time to prove to me that it was worth doing.

If you decided it was worth doing would you continue living alone? (Ruthie).

Oh no. But I consider that a very remote possibility. Oh yeah, if I met someone I’d live with them, but you know, like, it would take a long time to get to that point (Karen).

Karen points out that she has chosen to think of living alone as her ideal because to depend on others is to lose control. Her previous experiences of relationships provide her a framework to set up a dichotomy between living alone and being in a relationship:

I thought I needed to be with someone to be happy and most of the time I was with someone I was not happy, and one day I just kind of went ‘Well that doesn’t make sense. I’m happy. I don’t need someone’…You know people are different depending upon who they’re around in terms of what they can get out of someone, and you know, it’s what’s in it for them. Forget it. I’m not interested, not going to waste my time…I don’t need to go through that. I’m happy on my own so why would I throw the balance out? (Karen).

While the others who choose living alone as their first preference either clearly or ambivalently imagine maintaining solo living into old age, Karen’s future is not so clear. Less ambivalent and more overtly contradictory than Wal and Sonny’s stories, Karen suggests that framing solo living as her first preference is a defensive
strategy she uses to minimise the stress of an unchartered future. Her dichotic reasoning iterates that living alone is a rational choice and seeks to eliminate the discontent and disappointment she experiences when she ‘wishes’ for a partner.

**Living Alone is My Choice but My Second Preference**

People who choose living alone as their second preference often frame it as ideal in the short term, because while solo living is chosen, it is chosen only in the absence of a partner and is therefore hoped to be a temporary phase. The construction of a choosing self becomes all the more difficult when taking into account the largely unknowable dimension of a future relationship, and the unfulfilled wishes that Karen’s strategy endeavours to eradicate are factors that require these people to work especially hard at conveying that they are effectively choosing a successful and acceptable self.

As is the case with those who choose living alone as their first preference, people who choose living alone as their second preference also engage with positive and socially sanctioned ideals such as being autonomous and independent, or amassing wealth, property or other symbolic means to convey that they are successful and acceptable relative to negative stereotypes of people who live alone. On the surface of it, participants who choose living alone as their second preference often vehemently assert their control of their situation. As Josh, a tradesman in his late-forties who has lived alone for seventeen years, puts it:

> [Living alone is] totally up to me. It’s my choice. I haven’t met the right person. Haven’t wanted to commit to the right person too, so it’s up to me (Josh).
Just below the surface, however, the contingency of an undesired permanently single status requires ongoing attendance. Jasmine and Tracy who are both administrators in their early-thirties, and Anais, a professional in her mid-thirties, demonstrate the constant effort required to balance an undesired single status with socially approved success:

[Living alone is] probably only temporary because I’d like not to be single. I don’t have a desire to be married, but I’d like to have a partner of a long-term nature... So either a live-in or a drop-in partner would be nice [laughs]. I guess in a way I’m happy where it’s at, and it doesn’t bother me if this is it. That would be a bonus if someone comes along to change that. I think I’m quite lucky. If I wanted to pack up tomorrow or go and work overseas, or you know, have a sea change or do something drastically different, there’s nothing stopping me (Jasmine).

I’m like, you know, ‘It will happen for me. I’m not less of a person because I’m single. I’m not less of a person because I live on my own. If anything, you guys got married and then bought your homes and your houses together. I’m doing this by myself and I’m proud of that’ (Tracey).

[Living alone is] probably not ideal in the long term. It’s been ideal for the time I’ve been doing it, but I guess I’ve got to a point where you know I’d like to find someone and, you know, I’ve had boyfriends and stuff, but it would be nice to have someone that you lived permanently with as a partner, not as a flatmate. But for now it’s ideal for me because I can, you know, I work strange hours and it suits me (Anais).

Jasmine, Tracey and Anais illustrate the ambivalence involved in the perpetual balancing of stigma with social acceptability that living alone as a second preference requires. In explaining that she has arrived at a point in her life where she would like to find a partner, and that living along ‘for now’ is ideal, Anais articulates the paradoxical nature of her position. She continues:

Because you don’t have a partner, you know, this time of year [Christmas] can be horrendous because you’ll be invited to things but you’re always invited with a partner. And often you’ll go, and you might be the only person who’s single at that function and that can be a bit horrible. It just makes you feel a bit left out I think. So this year my friend is flying down from Sydney for Christmas time [laughs] which will be fantastic. So yeah, you just go through phases with that - New Year’s Eve is a classic. So actually we’re going to Vanuatu for New
Anais oscillates from her account of feeling left out over the holiday season, to plans regarding her overseas trip, which she reassuringly balances by turning her story around from one where she feels stigmatised, to one in which she is choosing a socially approved lifestyle. Balancing her independence and success against the contingency and failure associated with not having a partner but wanting one, allows Anais to present her as yet unrealised partnership in an acceptable frame. Her anxiety about whether her presentation is succeeding or not is expressed in her jocular shifting of the ‘blame’ for her singleness onto her parents:

I have a good friend, you know a neighbour from Sydney who’s just turned thirty, has a good job in Sydney. Works really, really hard, works long hours, is single and just bought her own place… So we have a theory that it’s our parents’ fault - they made us too independent. They taught us to work hard, to, you know, look after ourselves. So it’s their fault [laughs]. That’s our theory anyway [laughs] (Anais).

By trading off her single status against her self-sufficiency, and shifting any remaining culpability onto her parents, Anais clearly differentiates her position from that of the career woman who chooses to live alone:

It’s assumed that because I have a career that I’m so focused on my career and that’s why I live alone and that’s why I can’t get out and meet anyone and that’s why I choose to be in my own place. Which is not, it’s not the reason, but it maybe is a bit, but you know, it’s not my own choice to do that (Anais).

Anais challenges the prevailing construction of personal choice as the definitive architect of circumstance and contests the popular binary distinction of women as either career or family focused. She resents the supposition that her successful career excludes her from successful relationships and she states that she intends to have a child irrespective of whether she is able to find the partner she seeks. While reinforcing the dominance of the neoliberal rhetoric around choice by using it as a
marker of what she is not, she also resists it. Her simultaneous compliance with, and resistance to, the rhetoric suggests that while the neoliberal discourse is dominant, it is not hegemonic, and as she engages with it, she also positions herself as resistant to it, and clearly intends to go her own way.

John Bone’s (2010) article, ‘Irrational Capitalism: The Social Map, Neoliberalism and the Demodernisation of the West’ provides insight into Anais’ simultaneous resistance to, and engagement with, the neoliberal discourse. Bone draws on ‘neurosociology’ which incorporates developing neuro-scientific knowledge into sociological understandings, and the sociological concept of ‘social maps’. Social maps are internalised representations of the social environment and social cohesion is thought to form around the sharing of similar social maps. Bone argues that people socialised in neoliberal societies are emotionally motivated to defend neoliberal logic and are therefore complicit in what he has called ‘demodernisation’, or the distortion and destruction of the rational project. Bone argues that repetitive and emotionally charged messages intended to normalise neoliberal arrangements, which are mobilised through the political system and the mass media, have become integrated into peoples’ social maps which people defend when they are challenged or threatened (Bone, 2010: 721). Bone suggests that neoliberalism is thus supported by people’s emotional motivation to sustain and defend their social maps, and in turn, neoliberal ideology. Bone argues that this has formed such an endemic default way of thinking and feeling that even people who are inclined to resist neoliberalism, such as Anais, are limited in their capacity to imagine alternatives (Bone, 2010: 725).
Bella is a public servant in her mid-forties who has lived alone for thirteen years. Her uncertainty about whether solo living is her choice provides insight into the application of Bone’s theory by demonstrating that people who share her ‘social map’ facilitate and perpetuate neoliberal dominance in the social world and exert considerable influence:

I think that fifty percent is my choice about making decisions about how things are going or not going and the other fifty percent, I suppose not my choice because, I don’t know, well I suppose, yeah, no, one-hundred percent it’s my choice isn’t it? Because I’ve made choices about partners that haven’t been the best. I don’t often think about it that way. Circumstance isn’t a word that I’d probably often think about, because I think the people I talk to are more around the choices rather than circumstances (Bella).

Bella articulates confusion about neoliberal understandings of personal choice. She begins by attributing her solo living as much to circumstance as to her own doing but then capitulates to the idea that she has ‘chosen’ those circumstances. She thinks she should be ‘one-hundred percent’ responsible for the circumstances of her life, but she feels that she is not, and her sense of resistance is restricted by the overriding discourse.

**Living Alone is Due To Circumstances Beyond My Control**

The limitations that Bone outlines regarding people’s capacity to resist neoliberal logic are particularly evident in the stories of people who do not choose to live alone. While they offer resistance to the dominant discourse of personal choice by framing their solo living to be the result of circumstances beyond their control, they are often restricted in their ability to present themselves as successful, and consequently feel stranded as victims of their own ‘bad’ choices. Often underemployed, pensioners or in receipt of state support, this group of participants have frequently faced the difficulties of illness, poverty, unemployment, and
childhood abuse. Unlike those who have the ability to frame living alone as a choice and themselves as successful, these people blame themselves for what they see as the less than ideal circumstances of their lives. Whilst framing their living arrangements as circumstantial, they often accept personal responsibility for those circumstances and are beset by a sense of culpability for either not making the right choices, or for a failure to exercise control in determining the structure of their lives.

Demonstrating the fluidity between the groups of people who choose living alone as their second preference and those who did not choose to live alone, this sense of self-blame is troubling for some members of each group. As I have demonstrated with Bella’s quote above, people from either of these groups can find it difficult to say whether living alone is their choice. This doubt is evident in Joel’s story. Joel is a well-educated full-time student in his late-thirties who has lived alone for seven years. When I asked him if it was by choice that he had come to be living alone, he answered:

I’m not sure I can give you a neat answer as to the causality of [my solo living]. I mean on one level I’m living alone because I don’t have a partner. I haven’t found a partner yet, so I could just give that as an answer but then one might, at a deeper level, why haven’t I done so? Is it because there’s something about me that makes me less attractive to potential partners, or is it that I’m being too choosy, or is it that I’m in a kind of a groove with a set group of friends where there haven’t been many potential partners on the horizon? And the answer is sort of all of that… It’s simply a feeling of regret that I didn’t behave better or make better choices at times in the past and maybe I’d be, maybe I’d have the perfect partner now and be really happy if I’d made better choices back then (Joel).

While Joel feels uncertain about whether living alone has been his choice, his sense of culpability is more concrete. His story and others like it, suggest that in a culture where people are expected to aspire towards autonomy and personal fulfilment and to interpret reality as a matter of individual responsibility, when people are not
enabled to make the choices that gain social success and approval, the sense of personal failure is difficult to avoid.

Liam further illustrates this problematic position. In his mid-thirties, Liam has lived alone for five years. Subsequent to obtaining a university degree, he spent considerable time and energy becoming qualified for an industry that collapsed before he was able to profit from his expertise. Presently employed as a manual labourer, Liam feels angry with particular individuals who played a role in his disappointments:

I was really pissed off with my employer in Victoria for backing out of their agreement because that was a red carpet opportunity that I never ever had ever again. I just couldn't recover from that. So at the end of that period, I was pretty desperate and I thought ‘The only thing I can do now is start applying for manual labour jobs’ (Liam).

Along with his externalised anger, Liam also carries a heavy weight of personal blame for his present situation:

[Living alone] appears to be circumstantial, but on the other hand, that’s not always to blame. In that, I put myself in this position to a large degree. However, if things had been, if things had worked out for me, I might have been in a better position to offer somebody something. You know, in other words, if we meet and they find out what my circumstances are, in other words, that there isn’t really much there despite the fact that I live in a nice house, then they’re probably going to be a bit, you know, circumspect about the possibilities. Whereas if they see something more solid, they’re much more inclined to look at you as somebody that they might be interested in. I guess that reflects on, you know, who people are as well doesn’t it? What they’re looking for? But it’s the way things are in the world (Liam).

Liam shows resistance and resignation to ‘the way things are in the world’ that frame him as an inadequate provider. While some of Liam’s self-derision can most likely be attributed to traditional gender roles, and the neoliberal directive to develop oneself as an ‘entrepreneur-of-the-self’ shaped to suit the market, his solo
living adds a further dimension of complexity to his sense of failure and self-blame. Reflecting the neoliberal onus upon individuals’ choices, Liam does not express anger towards the short-termism, instability, de-structuring and unpredictability of neoliberal markets, which have significantly impacted his life, but rather turns his frustration upon himself and the choices he has made. Liam provides insight into the kind of pressure neoliberalism places on people who are ‘supposed’ to be in control of their lives but do not feel that they have much control. His story characterises the tension created when people become emotionally strained by neoliberal expectations and obligations to be the responsible creators of their circumstances and individualities:

About six months ago I sort of turned around and looked at all of my life up until that point and I thought ‘What have I been doing here?’ I haven’t sort of bothered to form any partnerships with people. I’ve concentrated on myself. And so yeah, I’ve got lots of skills and I know heaps, the only problem is, there’s no one with me and I don’t have a family. I’ve just turned thirty-five. So it sort of hit me like a brick wall and I sort of, you know, from that point on I’ve really been very reflective and a little bit regretful about what I’ve done and, you know, why didn’t I bother to go out and meet people and bring someone home or whatever? Like I can’t answer that. I think I had expectations and those expectations weren’t met, and when you realise that you’ve failed completely in one area and you turn around and look at the alternative prospective, yeah you get very depressed and upset about that (Liam).

The strain on Liam suggests that when people do not have access to financial capital and have no reasonable prospects of gaining access to it, the ‘freedom’ to exercise individual choices and be the creator of a marketable self can be a heavy and impossible burden. Liam’s experience, at odds with the individual empowerment that the neoliberal rhetoric promises, has left him with a sense of distressing impotence:

I’ve been thinking about [my single status] a lot and I can identify specific events that swung me, but the extent of your impact on those events has to be questioned. So I mean there are always decisions, and
you make a rational decision based on your circumstances. But there are possibly other things that I could have done. It depends on how you’ve developed mentally and who you are. And I’ve often wondered whether because my parents were from a different generation to all of my friends’ parents, whether that had a great deal to do with it. And I think it probably did to some extent. But, um, then you have to look at yourself and who you are. You know, I mean, and quite honestly, I can’t say that I’m like other people in other ways. I’m different from other people. I always have been (Liam).

Liam suspects the circumstances of his life have shaped its course, but is concurrently compelled to dispute any structural influences on his personal situation. Unable to position himself as successful in the social realm and troubled by his undesired single status, he settles on defining himself as ‘different’ to other people. I mentioned above that people who chose living alone as their first preference often draw upon discourses of individual psychology to legitimate their positions. While this is also true of people who do not choose to live alone, their legitimisation tends to be a simultaneous pathologisation. People who do not choose to live alone often identify with medically diagnosed pathologies, or simply express a sense of personal failure. The potency of the stigma linked with living alone when it has not been freely chosen is revealed in this group’s stories. Exchanging it for the stigmas associated with mental illness or personal incompetence suggests that the stigma of living alone when it is not chosen is perceived as the more powerfully damaging.

**Living Alone is A Combination Of Circumstances And Choices**

Unlike people who feel confusion over whether their living alone is a personal choice, the final group feel sure that living alone is the result of both circumstances over which they had little control, combined with their personal choices. Anna is a teacher in her mid-thirties who has a globalised career and has lived alone for fifteen years. Moving from country to country in furtherance of her career has been
a staple of her life and living alone seems to her to be the most effective way of managing her lifestyle. In answer to my inquiry into whether living alone is her choice she said:

A bit of both [choice and circumstance] I think. I love it and I choose it, but I think if I was somebody who didn’t want to live alone, it would be quite tricky to live the life that I’ve lived. Because I’ve lived in a lot of places...and I can’t imagine doing that if I was someone that always wanted to live with people. I think that would be quite tricky because when you arrive in a place you don’t know anybody, it’s a lot easier, practically, to get a place, set yourself up, you’ve got your job, you’ve set yourself up, and then gradually you meet friends. To be somebody who always wanted to live with people, I think that would be a really tricky lifestyle (Anna).

In order to maintain her career in a globalised workplace, Anna feels that she cannot afford to be ‘somebody that always wanted to live with people’. Anna suggests that she has fashioned her subjectivity according to what she feels is workable. Quite a number of participants had initially come to be living alone after moving interstate or overseas for employment. Often people reported that circumstance initially caused their solo living and then through gaining experience and becoming accustomed to it, living alone had become a personal choice. This common geographic mobility reflects the mobility of the neoliberal workplace, and as Anna’s story suggests, the neoliberal order may play a role in the trend towards one-person households.

Dave’s story illuminates another path which some individuals follow into living alone. Dave is a high achieving professional in his mid-forties who has lived alone for approximately fifteen years. Although Dave’s choices have been those that are ‘supposed’ to bring him a sense of success and personal fulfilment, he explains that he does not feel that way:
I suppose some of it is choice and circumstances really. I’ve made those little choices all the time but I’m absolutely not conscious of it...Yeah you’re missing out on something. You know some things are worth working at. I’ve never lived in a live in relationship. It got to, in fact, last year I came to quite a crisis and I thought ‘Shit what have I done with my life?’ You know, I see all my other friends in relationships, married or otherwise with children and you feel like a big kid. You feel like you’ve wasted a big part of your life. That was certainly my experience. Which is not to say, it sounds a bit harsh you know, but on your down days it can take you a bit like that, and it’s not until you get some objectivity later and think ‘Well it takes all types’, kind of thing. If you’re a bit feeling low and a bit short on self-respect, that particular line will frequently take you down. [It makes me feel] inadequate in some ways and having wasted several opportunities. I don’t know if you know the ones. At the time, the decisions seemed quite rational and probably were quite rational to the extent that you make decisions. It’s all about those kind of things. You can just go on from one thing to another sometimes (Dave).

Dave points out that his choices have been ‘rational’ within the scheme of neoliberalism, but have not brought him the personal satisfaction he expected to find. What he has found is that his career and his independence do not fulfil him.

Dave also told me that:

I’ve always wanted to be in a relationship and not found that, or I’ve found it and maybe the other party had other ideas, you know [laughs]. So I think, really, personally, I suppose I could have chosen things differently and I would be in a relationship with somebody. That said, there were times that I did try make that choice, but you know, you can’t force somebody, so it’s a bit of both (Dave).

Dave raises the important matter here of how autonomous individuals’ choices interact with other autonomous individuals’ choices, and implicitly questions the compatibility of committed partnerships with the dominant idea that life is the outcome of one’s free and personal choices. Tensions caused by this conundrum are fundamental within the narratives of many participants who would like to find cohabiting partners. It is thus possible that the existence of this particular tension in the wider social atmosphere may also exert an influence on the move towards solo living.
Summary

Throughout this chapter I have argued that the tensions between the dominant neoliberal discourse around personal choice, the requirement to engage with coupled norms, and the discourses of individual psychology, allow and facilitate people’s ambivalent negotiation of acceptable subjective positions as solo living individuals. While the contrasting debates on neoliberalism in contemporary academic discourse are most often not central in participants’ lives, what is fundamental to people’s lived realities is whether they feel stigmatised or accepted in their everyday lives. People thus tend to inadvertently speak into the debate on neoliberalism and its impact upon individuals, and often simultaneously engage with, and disaffiliate from, the rhetoric around the impact of personal choice. Some people find the question of whether living alone is a choice clear-cut and easy to address, and others find it difficult and confusing. This confusion tends to be indicative of a tacit resistance to neoliberal notions of personal choice which participants may not have the political, ideological or language based affiliations to openly challenge.

Respondents are most often disinclined to consider stigma as applicable to their individual positions and rather than overtly recognising stigma, the stigma associated with living alone is defused by constructing solo living as a chosen and therefore acceptable status. This construction requires an ambivalent negotiation of the contradiction between couple-normativity and the neoliberal rhetoric of choice, which significantly impacts upon solo living people’s sense of self and their experience of everyday life. Participants’ stories suggest that the stigma associated with living alone is more about being perceived as being unable to effectively choose one’s destiny, than it is about living alone per se. This indicates that stigmas
associated with being a ‘victim’ of circumstance, or not ‘being in control’, and of being ‘undesirable’ or somehow ‘unmarriageable’ have a considerable influence in the lives of respondents. The following chapter further explores the influence of stigma in participants’ stories and how people often simultaneously resist and engage with it irrespective of whether or not they feel personally stigmatised.
Chapter Four – Stigma and Solo Living

Introduction

In this chapter I explore the stigma associated with the experience of living alone in the context of a social world which endorses notions of free choices and practices of fluid and multiple identity. In the previous chapter I argued that a noteworthy aspect of the stigma linked with solo living is associated with the perceived inability to execute personal choice. This chapter demonstrates that the stigma of being a ‘victim of circumstance’ is one facet of a multifaceted composite of stigmas linked with solo living. Respondents’ dominant framing of solo living as a free and personal choice, even when that framing is awkward and ill fitting, suggests that some of the rhetorical power of choice lies in its ability to obscure the disquieting reality of stigma. Stigma challenges notions of personal responsibility for free choices by rendering some choices subject to potential disapproval. In this chapter I show that participants are often expected to justify their solo living and required to respond to questions, comments and accusations which typically imply that living alone is aberrant and therefore a legitimate focus for public scrutiny. The majority of people I interviewed have experienced this scrutiny, and while some find it inconsequential or amusing, others find it distressing, annoying, or undermining. Respondents’ experiences with stigma suggest that participating in the discourse that people can create their ideal lives by choosing and inventing their own unique identities and lifestyle trajectories, can in some cases, be restrained by encountering stigma which wields the power to exclude them from social groups. This chapter therefore discusses the implications of challenging the social norms around which identities are created, and demonstrates that although stigma is a significant aspect
of participants’ lives, it is neither hegemonic nor a consistently identifying personal characterisation, and participants negotiate various means of recuperation.

**History, Stigma and Solo Living**

Analysis of solo living since the nineteenth century suggests that solo living individuals have often been stigmatised because they are pitied or feared (Chapman, 2004: 160). During the nineteenth century, bachelorhood in later life could signify failure, older bachelors were often ridiculed, and the low status of unmarried women of the same time period was by no means a new phenomenon. For centuries, single women had been perceived as a threat to social order and were subject to accusations of emotional, social, and sexual incompleteness by both the church and the state (Chapman, 2004:162). War widows sewed the first seeds of a change in attitudes to solo living during the 1940s as they gained residential independence (Goldcheider and Waite, 1991: 2). Nevertheless, as demonstrated by the results of a 1957 survey revealing that fifty-three percent of the American public believed that single people were ‘sick’, ‘immoral’ or ‘neurotic’ (Ehrenreich, 1983: 120; Bellah et al, 1985: 110), strict social sanctions against solo living remained rigid well into the twentieth century.

The dominant history of the stigma associated with solo living is perhaps also revealed in literary cautionary tales. As far back as Genesis, it was alleged that God himself denounced living alone (Genesis 2:18). Aristotle argued in *Politics*, that an individual who lives alone is “either a beast or a god” (Aristotle, translated Saunders, 1995: 11). Diderot’s 1757 play, *The Natural Son*, contains the line “Only the wicked man lives alone” (Furbank, 1992: 151), and Reily (2002) argues that “a
taint of vice always clouds solitariness” which renders women “not only wicked but de-sexed” (Reily, 2002: 8). This ‘taint of vice’ is the focus of the Victorian tales of self-indulgent bachelors such as Dorian Grey and Dr Jekel, and ‘fallen’ women like Mrs Rochester, consigned to the attics of polite Victorian society. Evidence of the stigma associated with living alone can also be located in historical documents revealing that solo living in mid-nineteenth century Sydney was a criminal offence for ‘common’ women who were liable to be arrested on an assumption of their ‘immorality’ (Garton, 1998).

**Today’s Solo Living Stigma**

The predominant circumstances in which participants of this study find themselves the target of stigmatisation are those where coupled norms dominate the social forum. Dinners or birthday parties and family gatherings are often the sites where stigma is encountered, where it is most frequently aimed at non-conformity with coupled norms. On the face of it, this suggests that stigma associated with living alone is about non-conformity with coupled norms. However, the historical figures of nuns, priests and missionaries who also live outside of coupled norms have not been subject to the same level of stigmatising representation, despite the infamous abuses of power recently linked to these fields. This implies that cohabiting itself, whether in monasteries, missions or other institutions, provides a ‘fold’ of protection from the stigma of solo living. This could perhaps be explained by the valorisation of solitariness when it is linked to selfless commitment to vocations, such as in the case of those who are ‘married to the church’, which provides a similar compensatory discourse to that used by ‘successful’ participants. The archetypal governess or carer, on the other hand, was traditionally pitied or derided
as someone who had not had the opportunity to marry and was thus conceptualised as deficient in some way. This contrast brings attention to the cultural evaluation of vocational commitments whereby those carried out in the public realm are rendered superior to those undertaken in the private. Although this is a historically gendered distinction, in the context of this study, gender has little impact upon success in the public realm, whereas socio-economic status has considerable influence. In the following section I argue that although the stigma linked with solo living is historical and culturally embedded, the stigma participants encounter is multidimensional, complex, conditional, and not necessarily about living alone.

Sara is a professional in her mid-forties who has lived alone for sixteen years. She is employed in a demanding political field and has regularly found herself the target of stigma. Sara knows that her living arrangements are thought of as unusual:

My partner lives alone. I know it’s weird. We’ve been together for eighteen years. I guess that’s why we’re still together (Sara).

She explains that living alone is challenging to a range of normative assumptions about how life ought to be lived:

I have experienced stigma, even with my friends who I love… You do learn that a lot of prejudices and a lot of stuff is born of fear, and I just think that, I mean I’ve been attacked for not having kids, I’ve been attacked for not being married, for not living with my partner. I have in the past, and I honestly can say it has never gotten to me because I don’t see what business it is of theirs for a start. I just don’t get it. I don’t understand why people feel the need to challenge. And with my friends, I think it really has been born of the fear that my not following the norm is challenging, indirectly, their choice, and I’ve found this especially with kids… Not to have children… it confronts people. It worries them because it feels like you’re criticising, implicitly, their choice to do that, and that’s not the case. I don’t care. If you want to do that ‘Great good luck to you’. I’m not in judgment of anyone and I think ‘God, am I giving out judgemental vibes? Is that why these people are reacting that way?’ (Sara).
Sara’s story demonstrates the multidimensional nature of the stigma associated with living alone. People challenge her marital status, her childlessness, and her living-apart-together relationship. She describes a particularly personal affront at a party:

I have had someone attack me at a party about [living alone]. Asked, and not only that, but ‘Why I didn’t have children?’ I mean he went way too far. ‘What’s the matter with you?’ and I was so confronted by it and sort of bemused because it never occurred to me that this could be. This guy obviously had old-fashioned ideas and values. But yeah, in the end I told him to F off. I said ‘I don’t know what your problem is mate’. I just think it’s a personal choice. I’m perfectly happy with it, and actually I don’t care about what other people think (Sara).

In Bourdieu’s (1977) terms, stigma can be understood as a form of “symbolic violence” guarding the boundaries of social order. In this way, the ‘attack’ that Sara describes suggests that that her position presents an especially strident challenge to normative arrangements. Her long-term partnership prevents stigmatisers imagining that she would prefer to cohabit and that she lives alone because she is single. The stigma here, then, is not about being single but is instead focused on the fact that she does not live with her partner. So, while stigma is predominantly aimed at non-conformity with coupled or familial norms, as I will argue below, it perhaps also has roots in deeper fears about the unregulated possibilities of living alone.

As Sara does, Drew, a post-graduate student in his late-thirties who has lived alone for five years, illustrates the restorative process which invariably accompanies being stigmatised:

I think there’s a huge stigma around being single in this world. I mean, people don’t necessarily go out of their way to be negative about being single, or deliberately or consciously, but quite often, for instance, people ask me off hand type of questions like ‘Why haven’t you got a girlfriend?’ Or ‘Why didn’t you stick with the last one you did have?’ As if there’s something wrong with me being single. As if there’s some kind of legacy. As if I’m deficit in some way. But as I mentioned earlier, I usually stick up for myself, usually willingly and quite powerfully. ‘The reason I’m not in a relationship with so and so is because it wasn’t working’. So I assert my right to be single and that I
do make those choices, and to try to correct people’s misconceptions around that being a couple is the only natural way to exist on planet earth and therefore being single is somehow unnatural, unwholesome and aberrant. So I contest all that stuff, quite rigorously, and I’m not ashamed to be single and I would not be ashamed to be in a couple situation either (Drew).

Drew describes his understanding that underlying the stigma enacted through questions about being single, is the assumption that it is ‘somehow unnatural, unwholesome and aberrant’ to be so. Drew’s conviction to assert his right to ‘make those choices’ and to correct common misconceptions, suggests that he does not consider the stigma associated with living alone to be legitimate. He recognises the stigma in people’s questions, but rigorously contests it and rejects the associated shame. As the majority of participants’ narratives do, Drew’s story suggests that while actively or passively participating in the dominant rhetoric of choice, participants are also negotiating stigma by invoking alternative aspects of identity such as professional, marital, social, or other culturally approved subject positions to demonstrate that rather than a dominant identity, solo living is simply one facet of their multifaceted identity. Furthermore, this facet of identity is often fluid as people frequently present themselves as being open to the possibility for future change.

Importantly for those people who choose to live alone as their first preference — who also tend to have high socio-economic status — although stigma is recognised and negotiated, it is not internalised and therefore not a personal concern. For others, however, who would like to find partners, or are experiencing social disadvantage, or who did not choose to live alone, stigma encountered in the social world is recognised, negotiated, and in varying degrees, internalised. Thus while particular stigmas associated with coupled norms or social disadvantage are salient
for some participants, a comprehensive stigma of living alone is most often effectively resisted. In the following section, I will therefore suggest that the sociological concept of an all-encompassing stigma that leads to a loss of status does not incorporate contemporary understandings of multiplicity, and does not, therefore, adequately describe the stigma that the majority of participants encounter.

**Erving Goffman’s Stigma in the 21st Century**

In Chapter One I pointed out that Goffman’s (1963) work is exceptionally influential in the contemporary sociological theorising of stigma. Because this is so, it is important to bring attention to the fact that he bases his model of stigma upon the assumption that:

> A necessary condition for social life is the sharing of a *single set of normative expectations by all participants*, the norms being sustained in part because of being incorporated. When a rule is broken restorative measures will occur; the damaging is terminated and the damage repaired, whether by control agencies or by the culprits themselves (Goffman, 1963: 152, emphasis added).

I will return to this point after demonstrating that Goffman recognised that people who do not conform to martial norms can be subject to some degree of stigma. He mentions that “peripheral instances” of “social deviancy” such as:

> The metropolitan unmarried and merely married who disavail themselves of an opportunity to raise a family, and instead support a vague society that is in rebellion, albeit mild and short-lived, against the family system …are likely on occasion to find themselves functioning as stigmatised individuals (Goffman, 1963: 172-3).

Goffman’s work is situated within the structuralist thinking of a period of sociological theorising which framed expectations around appropriate social identity to be the result of institutionally enforced demands and where individual agency was largely overlooked. Structuralist models of social control and cohesion could not have provided an explanation for the postmodern rise in one-person households,
and as Goffman states, the “rebellion against the family system” occurring during the 1960s, was anticipated to be “mild and short-lived”. The social world is now thought to operate through an ongoing process of negotiation, and contestations of traditional norms, such as the rise in solo living, provide dynamic sites for productive rethinking about social life. The concept of a common “single set of normative expectations” has been superseded by the recent theoretical shift to understandings of agency, fractured and multiple senses of identity, fluid and ever-changing social rules, and individual freedoms to ‘reinvent’ the self at will. As a consequence, many formerly stigmatised identities and lifestyles have gained social acceptance. The significant changes in understandings of what constitutes legitimate identity are reflected in diverse family formations including blended, single-parent, living-apart-together, de-facto, double-income-no-kids and same-sex families that now share the norm with nuclear families. Yet, the foundational weight of structuralist thinking around relational ideals and norms continues to operate at various levels of contemporary discourse and is evident in both the current sociological research on stigma, and in the stigma encountered by participants.

**Stigma: 21st Century Style**

Denise Riley’s (2002) article ‘The Right to Be Lonely’ provides insight into the experience of stigma that the participants in this study also describe. Riley discusses the process whereby the legitimisation of unorthodox lifestyles creates “new hierarchies of social acceptability” (Riley, 2002: 2). She argues that the overlap between the demise of the traditional family and the contemporary proliferation and social acceptance of its variants, has generated a new configuration of social life where “one must count as a family in order to count at all” (Riley, 2002: 8). Riley
points out that despite the rapid growth of the one-person household, to be without family remains largely indefensible, and she suggests, somewhat ironically, that the single person may need to be represented as a “family of one” to gain legitimate social status (Riley, 2002: 9).

Julia, a technician in her early-forties who has lived alone for six years, demonstrates that Riley’s proposition that to be without cohabiting family is to be positioned low on a social hierarchy has resonance in participants’ descriptions of, or defences against, the stigmatising they encounter:

Oh I’ve had that comment, ‘Oh what’s wrong with you, you’re single, you’ve never been married, well what’s wrong with you? How did you feel about that? (Ruthie)
Yeah well I suppose it actually made me feel angry, that’s what it was. The assumption that …there’s got to be something wrong with her, a social misfit or I don’t know what they think, but it’s obviously something that the majority of people are hooked-up, married with kids or, and I’m also, I don’t have children, so that’s the other thing, yeah. It’s probably more acceptable to be a single mum than it is to be single and not have a child. I don’t know, some mums might beg to differ (Julia).

While in some respects living alone is taking up a position against the norm, participants like Julia, generally identify as ‘normal’ citizens. Thus, unlike the overt rebellion of ‘outlaw’ groups such as Bikies or street gangs, the subjective position inhabited by people who live alone is a subtle distinction from the norm. The stigma encountered is also subtle and operates at a very different level from that of the moral panics surrounding groups like Bikies (Cohen, 1973). Nevertheless, stigma is a significant aspect of participant’s experience, and as Julia demonstrates, living outside familial norms is a salient aspect of it.
Structural Stigma

Foucault (1977) proposes that stigma is constituted within the structural inequalities which discriminate against those living outside of approved norms and which discourage individuals from breaking social conventions. This structural stigma is reflected in Pam’s story:

I suppose [stigma] always comes up at election time when friends are making their comments and thoughts based on the family. I’m thinking well nobody’s noticed that there’s people that are living on their own that they’re not addressed as an audience (Pam).

Chapman (2004) argues that governments are becoming increasingly anxious about the growing numbers of single people who could potentially become dependent on the state in later life (Chapman, 2004:159), and while this is not a concern represented in the public arena, the notable silence about the solo living demographic in the current political rhetoric and social and economic policy providing for ‘working families’ points to the state’s implicit disapproval of one-person households. I will return to this issue in Chapter Seven, but for now flag the stigma embedded in the state structure as an issue about which the majority of participants express discontent.

Negotiating Stigma

Many respondents, such as Josh, describe stigma as an internal process rather than something which is overtly encountered in the social environment:

Yes socially [stigma] does limit you. Especially when you haven’t got a partner and people think at my age why haven’t I had kids? They think it’s not normal, and I think, some people in their own minds they look down on you and they think something’s wrong with you because you’re still single. You’re still out there doing whatever it is they think you’re doing and they think there’s something wrong with you. Yes, I do [feel stigma]. …When I’m going to work functions or work shows, I feel like when you haven’t got a partner and you turn up on your own, it feels a bit awkward and people wonder ‘What’s wrong?’ or ‘Is there a
problem?’… I just think to myself when I look at other couples that are together and they’ve been together for years and I just think, ‘Are they really happy?’ At least I can say that I’m happy most of the time… My next relationship, if I choose to be with someone, I’ll make it work essentially (Josh).

Although Josh describes a significantly negative experience with internalised stigma, he recuperates by employing the common method of drawing a contrast between what he perceives to be the negative aspects of coupled norms, with his relative happiness and freedom to ‘choose to be with someone’. As I pointed out in the previous chapter, stigma linked with a perceived incapacity to achieve relational norms is a considerable aspect of many people’s experience of solo living. Construction of positive identity against this is especially effective if people have access to another normative socially acceptable status such as workplace, financial or social success, or the capacity to implement personal choice. Anna, who has maintained a successful and globalised career, illustrates this point:

I kind of think of myself as a jetsetter. That’s poverty jet-set, you know. This sort of, you know, ‘I’m in Adelaide now but watch me I’ll be in Tokyo’. And I actually think given that spin, living alone is massively liberating because, you know, and possibly that’s resting on the laurels of having done all of that. Possibly if I’d grown up in Adelaide, got a place in the western suburbs and gone ‘Hmm there’s me, I live alone with cats’, maybe then I’d struggle with it more. But as it is, my life’s pretty amazing and I’m really proud of the stuff I’ve done and really happy with it. So I don’t feel like, um, yeah possibly the people that say hello next door that don’t really speak to me maybe think I’m a witch, I don’t know. I don’t give a rat’s ass really because they’re wrong. I look at their lives and just think ‘Oh what hellish days’ because you know, they’re forever chasing a toddler around the garden and screaming at it to not do this or do this and I just think ‘Oh God’, you know ‘I’m lying in a hammock reading a book or something. Wow, I love my life’ you know (Anna).

Anna suggests that to have a ‘jet-setter’ lifestyle and live alone evokes a very different status from living alone with cats in the ‘western suburbs’, and draws a contrast between her love for her own lifestyle and the ‘hellish days’ she imagines her neighbours endure. Like Anna, Adele also enjoys considerable workplace
success. They both feel empowered to embrace and thereby disable stereotypical symbols of stigma:

I used to work in [a place that publishes a dictionary in the UK] and it’s ninety percent women. And most of those women are women who live alone with cats and teapots and stuff...and I used to joke about that there, that you know, I was living alone with cats and all I needed was a teapot and I’d be one of them, you know, and all this stuff. I don’t have a teapot. I must get one. Because that was what the stereotype was, these mad ladies living alone and really sort of shuffling around in the bowels of the dictionary, you know, stuff. So yeah there’s definitely that stereotype and I’ve sort of played with it over time, but I don’t really think of my life that way (Anna).

I often describe myself as a spinster living alone with my dogs. I don’t have any problem with that banner. Some people look really shocked they go ‘Oh you poor thing’. And I’m thinking ‘What’s wrong?” No. I look at some people like my friend that I described to you, and think ‘How do you live on a daily basis like that?” If some fat guy was trying to clamber on top of me while I was trying to read my Austin McCall novel and trying and root me, I would stab him! I just don’t know how people stand it (Adele).

Negotiating stigma is also achieved by providing evidence of one’s lovability in the description of past or present coupled relationships. Ivy demonstrates this method:

No [I don’t feel stigmatised], but I think that maybe because I’ve done both [been married and lived alone] and that maybe because I’m [in my early-fifties]. I look at my son, who’s twenty-nine, and I think he does [feel stigma about living alone] and I think he feels because his friends are either living with someone or are married, he feels more of that [stigma], but no I don’t, I don’t at all (Ivy).

Ivy’s story illustrates that construction of positive identity is particularly successful if people have been married or living in a cohabiting partnership in the past. Living alone can be represented as more legitimate if people have previously sustained a ‘successfully’ long-term relationship. Positive self-representation is less effective if people are negotiating multiple devalued statuses such as poverty, social isolation, disability or unemployment along with solo living. Max, a student and disability pensioner in his early-fifties who has lived alone for twenty-six years illustrates both these points:
Some people see you as deviant but you can’t do anything about that. And how do I feel about it? I’m disappointed that people see that. I grew up with the same sorts of concepts [regarding solo living individuals] in the sixties and seventies. We had a lady across the road and she lived by herself... I got to know her reasonably well. To know that she wasn’t weird or strange but it was just that all of her children had grown up and married and moved elsewhere. She was just building a new home for herself to retire in that was going to be nice and easy to live in. And that was in the mid-sixties so I suppose she was [stigmatised]. So I’ve seen it, people have stigmatised you but there’s little you can do about it. I’m not embarrassed or ashamed. I’m happy with my choices (Max).

Max feels ‘disappointed’ that he is stigmatised and although he feels he cannot do anything about it, he nevertheless actively recuperates by stating that he is contented and happy with his ‘choices’. Max also suggests that had he not come to know that his neighbour was a widow with grown children, her stigmatised ‘weird or strange’ reputation may have continued to determine his estimation of her. With this story, Max further illuminates the recuperative potency of previous marriages or marriage-like partnerships and the existence of children.

In the preceding section I have demonstrated that whether more or less effectively, people negotiate stigma by invoking the discourse of choice, or emphasising alternative positive facets of identity, or by drawing contrasts between the perceived negative aspects of coupled norms with their own positive experience. In the following section I argue that circumventing the stigma of being un-partnered protects people against stigma reaching the personal and underlying ‘moral’ domain.

**Moral Stigma**

In Chapter One I discussed Yang and associates’ (2007) contention that the actions of both the stigmatised and the stigmatiser, can be read as “interpreting, living and
responding” with regard to what is most at stake and most fundamentally threatened (Yang et al., 2007: 1530). Taking this lead, participants’ stories suggest that the stigma they encounter is primarily related to the threat that living alone presents to norms and values around family, coupled relationships, and perhaps most threateningly, undefined and unregulated sexuality.

Lola is a professional in her mid-thirties who has lived alone for twelve years. She experiences both her single and solo living status’ as challenging to others and outlines the gendered component to the hierarchy of living arrangements:

It upsets me greatly that because I live alone everyone thinks that I don’t want to live alone…You meet people and, ‘Oh you’re forty and not married?’ ‘No, never married’. If I said I was divorced I’m sure people would go ‘Oh yeah, she gave it a shot’, but everyone wants to turn me into a married person or a divorced person or living with someone, and I take objection to that. Like I really take objection. I live alone because I want to. If I didn’t want to live alone I would have made an effort to not live alone…Maybe if you were a male living on your own it would be like ‘Oh yeah he’s a cool bachelor’, you know, [he] goes out. But for a woman there’s like ‘spinster’ and there’s already a negative connotation from spinster to bachelor and yeah I really take objection to that. And when people look at me like ‘Hmm, well you must be too fussy then’, it’s like ‘Well actually I am, but that’s okay’. You know. I really, when I was in my late-twenties and early-thirties, I’d get quite angry and people would go, ‘Ah, no wonder you’re single’. But it’s just like ‘Why do you have to turn a single person into a married person? How objectionable would it be if you were married and I was trying to turn you into single person?’ Could you imagine? ‘Beware of that vixen she’s trying to take you away’ and all that sort of thing (Lola).

Lola feels angry about the injustice of the hierarchical structure that stigmatises people who live alone. Her story demonstrates that despite the most emphatic efforts, stigma can be difficult to avoid. Her ideal standards pertaining to potential partners and her angry defence of her solo living is perceived as a wilful thwarting of the norm, which as Goffman suggests, invites moral stigmatisation. When she
gets angry about being framed as ‘too fussy’, she finds herself framed as ‘too angry’
to be marriageable, and trapped in a frustrating and undermining irresolvable bind.

**Sexual Stigma**

Lola also brings attention to historical gender norms and the linguistic symbols of
stigma that render a bachelor ‘cool’ and someone who ‘goes out’, and position a
‘spinster’ as his opposite. Alongside the negative terminology used to describe solo
living women, Lola points to the simultaneous and paradoxical stereotypes of the
sexually predatory and potentially threatening ‘vixen’ and the barren ‘spinster’.

Others like Bella and Thia also discuss this negative stereotyping:

> I’ve had that sort of stuff said to me, sort of, ‘You can’t make relationships work, you’re crazy, you’re mad, you’re neurotic’. Those sorts of things…you’re a threat. You show no interest in the husbands, but all of a sudden, you’re going to take the husbands away (Bella).

> If you look at a couple, the social organisers in a couple are women and they feel threatened by single women… and I’m not saying these married women are paranoid, but what happens is women, widowed women, and I’m a widow myself as well, are excluded, let alone if you’re a divorced woman. You know you wouldn’t be included (Thia).

The assumption that committed cohabiting partnerships keep people sexually
regulated and therefore socially safe is revealed in Bella and Thia’s exclusion from
social groups which fear their unregulated sexuality.

Tom and Josh mention that they do find that their friends’ imaginings of their lives
as ‘bachelors’ gain them a measure of social approval that is unavailable to
‘spinsters’, but they do not derive any satisfaction from the approval and find it
isolating and ‘awkward’:
People just think that I actually go out every weekend and find a woman and have sex with them. It’s just fantastic. Yeah right, okay, good luck. That’s what I call Married Man Syndrome (Tom).

Sometimes people just think you’re a womaniser, and I do find it awkward (Josh).

Tom and Josh both spoke to me at length about their anxieties concerning sexual relationships with women, which I discuss further in Chapter Six, and which are considerable factors in their sense of isolation. This connection between sexuality and isolation suggests that obscurity and distance created by the negative language and cultural assumptions pertaining to solo living can be isolating, because obscurity and distance provide a space for sensational imaginings about the unregulated sexual lives of people who live alone. Reflecting this, participants’ sex lives are often openly questioned and this line of questioning reveals three things: the fears associated with deeply entrenched notions of a heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy; the public discourses around sex and intimacy which have rendered these more visible and included in the recipe for self fulfilment and personal ‘health’, and contemporary ‘confessional’ pop-culture and the fascination with the salacious details of people’s private lives about which people feel entitled to ask.

Bella describes feeling stigmatised by questions about not having a ‘regular sex life’:

Sometimes they can be really personal around, like because you don’t have a partner, you don’t have a regular sex life. So that sort of thing. Really personal around your sex life. And I think ‘Gee there’s plenty of married couples who haven’t had sex in ages too’. So I really try and put that into context (Bella).

Bella also describes the common line of inquiry into her sexual orientation:

I’ve certainly had the ‘Maybe you’re a lesbian’ levelled at me lots of times as well. Yeah, because you don’t go from one relationship straight into another one. You know, ‘Maybe you’re a lesbian. Have you ever thought about that? Have you tried it with women? Do you want to give it a try just in case?’ (Bella)
Shannon describes a similar experience:

One of the things I’ve been finding probably in the last ten years is people are starting to question my sexuality and saying like ‘Are you a lesbian?’ And I just go ‘No I’m not’. Or they’re hinting towards it. And my mother, I happened to say something to my mother not so long ago actually and she said people have actually asked her [if I’m a lesbian] and I went ‘Oh right’. I just didn’t know that. She’d always kept it quiet. So, yeah, there’s definitely still that bit of a stigma to it (Shannon).

As I pointed out in Chapter One, Yang et al., (2007) argue that stigma impacts on loved ones in a similar way that it affects the stigmatised individuals themselves. Shannon’s mother’s revelation that she had kept inquiries regarding her daughter’s sexuality ‘quiet’, reveals that as Yang et al., argue, stigma becomes manifest through the recognition in each other of the associated shame. Thus stigma operates through, and impacts upon, the relationships, interactions and experiences that matter most in everyday life, and when stigma is directed at the very personal level of character, sexuality, or as I will demonstrate in Chapter Nine, emotional states such as loneliness, it is especially threatening to constructions of identity and sense of wellbeing.

Questions raised by solo living about participants’ sexuality are not always overt and can, as Brett describes, be directed in an implicit and underhand manner:

Yeah I do sometimes [feel stigmatised]. Only today actually I was emailing with some guys from the soccer club about going out because we won the competition this year. So we’re talking about going out for a night of celebration for that, and um, one of the guys sent an email and said that ‘Are all the wives and missus’ invited or Brett’s boyfriend?’ or something like, you know, insinuating that I’m homosexual because I live alone and I don’t have a partner and that sort of thing (Brett).

The common experience of solo living raising suspicions about sexuality indicates that solo living can be interpreted as an indication of being homosexual. The association between solo living and homosexuality is multi-layered, historical, and
implicit within the question of why one lives alone. At one level, the association between solo living and homosexuality is perhaps a legacy of the ‘Don’t ask, don’t tell’ social agreement of the past which former High Court Justice Michael Kirby describes in *Private Lives* (2011). Kirby discusses his life in the legal world where his long-term cohabiting homosexual partnership was rendered invisible by an unspoken agreement. As was the custom, when mixing in professional circles, Kirby’s partner would not accompany him in public or be present in the home they shared. Kirby recounts many Christmas parties where his partner would prepare everything and then disappear until the last guest had departed (Kirby, 2011). In this way, homosexuals were required to live a charade of solo living which may to some extent still inform the cultural association between homosexuality and living alone. As well as this, implicit within the question of why one lives alone, is the question of why one is not in a couple, and implicit within the question of why one is not in a couple, is the question of whether one is homosexual. Janet Halley (1993) argues that heterosexuality operates as a default category and people who transgress social norms are automatically expelled from the default category of heterosexuality and required to legitimate their sexual identities (Halley, 1993). Following this, participants’ common experience of feeling required to legitimate their sexual identities, suggests that solo living rates as a significant transgression of social/sexual norms. This is reinforced by comments made by Joanne, who is the only participant who described herself as non-heterosexual:

> Because I do have a lot of interest and a lot of my friends are in the queer community, [living alone is] actually how most of them live. So from within that community, there actually isn’t any stigma attached to it at all. And as far as stigma from the rest of the community, there’s more stigma about what I’ve done in my life and do in my life than what my living arrangements might be  (Joanne).
Joanne suggests that stigma about her sexuality overshadows any stigma that solo living might have evoked. As I did not explicitly inquire about sexual orientation and nor was it explicitly stated by participants, heterosexually was taken for granted in all but Joanne’s exception. This taken-for-granted-ness of heterosexuality provides a powerful reproduction of the heteronormative in participants’ narratives. While I did not specifically address the question of homosexuality, participants were at pains to distinguish themselves as heterosexual with stories about past or present heterosexual relationships or desires. It is important to note here that a different cohort of interviewees may have included more homosexual people who may well have had different responses.

People such as Charles, Mick and Rex demonstrate that internalised sexual stigma can also be a concern:

Look I worry that people think that ‘He hasn’t got a partner so he must be gay’ and I cringe at the thought because, I mean I’ve got nothing against gay men but I’m far from it (Charles).

On the odd occasion when I’ve gone out at twelve o’clock and have been too lazy to walk the fifty yards to the service station at the end of the road, you know, I’ll walk out, and because I’ve got three dirty great spotlights on the side of my house, you know sensor motion things, you know, they come on and I always think ‘Oh god what do [the neighbours] think? What’s he doing going at twelve o’clock at night? Curb crawling [in a red light district] or something?’ (Mick).

Especially as you get older, an older male, I think people are really suspicious. ‘Don’t let them near your kids’. No I think ‘Fuck em’. I don’t even know that they do [think that] it’s a bit of an attitude. If you’re living a different life, sometimes, to someone else, and you feel like you’re out of the norm, you, they, become suspicious that there are other things (Rex).

Rex’s confusion about exactly who becomes ‘suspicious that there are other things’ characterises the undermining potential of stigma. Despite being a successful professional in his mid-fifties, stigma around sexuality threatens his sense of
identity and wellbeing. This implies that stigma associated with sexuality is a particularly moral issue. Moral, in Yang and associates’ (2007) sense that it threatens people’s experience of everyday life, and also, the ‘morality’ of religious doctrine. As Rex points out, hegemonic coupled norms generate the assumption that people who live together have sex together, so when there is an absence of a cohabiting or partnered other, a suspicion is raised that solo living is due to ‘deviant’ sexuality. While this is undoubtedly sometimes simple curiosity, suspicion may also be derived from the weighty history of religious dogma regarding the ‘immoral’ potential of unregulated human sexuality.

Rourke’s story illustrates the deeply embedded sexual stigma associated with solo living. Rourke is a professional in his mid-forties who has lived alone for seven years following a twenty-three-year marriage. When I asked him if he feels stigmatised for living alone he answered:

It’s not even occurred to me that [stigma’s] there. I can understand why, perhaps, that it might be out there, but I’ve not been exposed to it in any way, shape, or form. Or felt it in any way, shape or form (Rourke).

Although it has ‘not occurred’ to Rourke that stigma is ‘out there’, when I asked him about his home he mentioned:

When I first left the marriage it was extremely important to me to have somewhere nice, and the thought of living on the second floor in a cream brick block of flats, just depressed the hell out of me. There was just no way I was going to leave a beautiful family home and go and hide like some kind of socially discarded paedophile in a horrible little block of flats. I just wanted to have something that I felt happy to come home to and felt good about, and that’s what I got (Rourke).

Rourke’s narrative suggests that although he does not feel conscious of stigma, at some level he is aware that had he not been able to afford to live ‘somewhere nice’ he would be at risk of being perceived as a ‘socially discarded paedophile’. While
this awareness does not negatively impact upon Rourke who is fortified by a high-status, financially rewarding profession, a current partnership, and two children from a former long-lasting marriage, it demonstrates the entrenched stigma associated with living alone.

Liam’s experience of stigma provides a striking contrast with Rourke’s:

Yeah of course, yeah [I do feel stigma]. Not so much in recent days because I’ve pretty much, I’ve got [a house that I rent now]. It’s not a status symbol. I don’t go for that kind of thing, but I consider myself now to be out of that period where I was completely hopeless and there weren’t any prospects... So being alone and having a stigma attached to it, isn’t quite so bad if you can be alone in certain circumstances. But when you’re living in a cabin in the back of someone’s yard, it’s not quite so joyous to be able to tell people that’s where you are (Liam).

The distinct contrast between Liam and Rourke’s experiences of stigma vividly illustrates each far end of the spectrum of respondents’ experiences with stigma. Stigma associated with solo living is multifaceted, complex, and graduated. For some it is simply an awareness of what they are not, but for others, stigma interferes with the experience of the self and everyday life. If people can successfully negotiate the stigma focused upon non-conformity with coupled and familial norms by proving social acceptability via an alternative socially approved status, they are protected from stigma aimed at the ‘moral’ level, of character, sexuality and identity. Experiences of stigma are thus fundamentally shaped by socio-economic status. All participants describe some exposure to the stigma associated with living alone, and most reject its legitimacy. Participants assert a ‘right’ to choose how to live their lives, and in its ability to obscure stigma, the rhetoric of choice is a strong line of defence. People who did not choose to live alone are therefore particularly vulnerable and have very little means of resolving the ambivalence. As Scambler (2009) points out, stigma is rarely the sole element of disadvantage.
De-stigmatising Solo Living

Stigma is a subtle and dynamic concept, and people who live alone are not necessarily outsiders, but at the same time, they are not automatically accepted either, and this is the cause of ambivalent conflict for many participants. The opportunity to dispel negative representations and stigma associated with living alone was the predominant motivation of people who responded to my call for participants. So, following Scambler’s suggestion that the chances of successfully de-stigmatising identities is somewhat dependent upon the history of the particular stigma and the conditions in which it is enacted (Scambler, 2006: 281), the possibility of successful identity politics around living alone is a complex issue. To begin with, the stigmatising of solo living individuals by others often does not address stigmatisers’ underlying fears about solo living providing a space for unregulated or ‘immoral’ behaviour, so misconceptions and fears are not overtly addressed, and in turn, are not challenged. Further to this, the individualistic nature of solo living may preclude group identification, and a new movement of identity politics on a broad scale could be therefore somewhat unlikely. An online community based in the USA named QuirkyAlone⁶ is a network of solo living individuals who seek group identification, but their ‘quirky’ representation suggests that they do not seek a ‘normal’ status. Most participants in this study though, do see themselves as ‘normal’, and in the description of stigma, are dynamically active in the restorative process and invariably do defend themselves from stigma — more or less effectively. Thus, rather than the traditional routes of group identification and representation, the de-stigmatisation of solo living could possibly occur through the individual efforts of a growing cohort of solo living individuals engaging with

⁶quirkyalone.net/qa/peoplelikeus.php
contemporary notions of free choice and multiple identities and rejecting notions of hegemonic normative expectations. However, as Bauman (2004) argues, when discussing identity politics, there is no point in talking about stigma unless we also talk about money and class. Bauman proposes that identity is the most divisive and sharply differentiating dimension of neoliberal social stratification. Access to the contemporary freedom to ‘choose’ identity, he argues, is barred to those who do not belong to the “global elite” and whose identities are constrained within, or limited by, “dehumanising stereotypes and stigmatising identities” (Bauman, 2004: 38). In this way, it is also likely that the de-stigmatisation of solo living on a broad scale would need to involve a redress of neoliberal social inequality, as well as recognition, representation, and accommodation of the solo living demographic within social policy.

**Summary**

In this chapter I have suggested that because theories of stigma have not integrated contemporary understandings of fluid and multifaceted identity, they do not adequately describe the stigma encountered by solo living individuals. Stigma associated with living alone is, to a greater or lesser extent, negotiable. It neither leads to an inevitable loss of status, nor does it mark its bearer as distinctly other. However, to avoid the loss of status, solo living individuals must engage in continual recuperative ‘work’. The stigma associated with solo living has a social history deeply embedded in cultural consciousness, and negotiating it is invariably a requirement of living alone. Participants’ experiences with stigma stress two inherent contradictions of the neoliberal era. They are each required to negotiate the contradiction between the dominant supposition that people can achieve personal
fulfilment through pursuing individual and autonomous choice, and the social imperative to engage with the normative ideal of the couple. At the same time, the contrasting experiences of stigma in respondents’ stories illuminate the “yawning gap” which Bauman (2000) sees as the fundamental contradiction of neoliberalism: between the ostensible right to choose one’s identity, and the unequal opportunities which render that ‘right’ to be either feasible or unrealistic (Bauman, 2000: 38).
Section Three
Managing Intimacy and Solo Living
Chapter Five - Career and Living Alone

Introduction

In Chapter Three and Chapter Four I argued that access to a narrative of success in the workplace provides participants with a relatively straightforward pathway through the tension, on the one hand between neoliberal discourses which champion freedom of choice, and on the other, the social expectation to conform with coupled norms. In this chapter I demonstrates that while this pathway is a more complex negotiation for women than it is for men, it also provides women with access to means of negotiation which are not equally available to men. This chapter thus begins to illustrate the impact of gender on constructions of solo living and to explore the various contexts in which working life is a focal point of most participants’ narratives. Respondents describe two distinct patterns of workplace interaction. Some people are positioned in long-term geographically stable employment, and others move between short-term positions which often involve geographic relocation. Either way, many people’s stories either make, or suggest, a connection between solo living and the changing dynamics of working life.

As I pointed out in Chapter One, Nicolas Rose (1996) and Paul du Gay (1997) argue that today, employment is interpreted as the key site within which people construct, represent, and confirm identity (Rose, 1996: 160; du Gay 1997). Bellah et al., (1985) suggest that as a consequence of this strong cultural emphasis on employment, contemporary citizens are often beset by an “isolating preoccupation with the self” (Bellah et al., 1985: 56). Working people who live alone thus risk
being perceived as determinedly individualistic and absorbed by career, and lacking connection to significant others. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) suggest that single people’s tendency or “need” to secure remunerative employment and a supportive social network creates insurmountable obstacles to forming intimate partnerships (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995: 145). This, they argue, is particularly so for “women who pursue an independent career but must in many cases pay a high price, the loneliness of the professionally successful woman” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995: 63).

**Women and Career**

In Chapter Three, I demonstrated with Anais’ story that the binary constructions of women as either career or family focused shape many women’s narratives of solo living. Anais directly challenges the dichotomy and clearly states that she wants to maintain her professional career *and* have a family. But Anais’ overt resistance is unusual and brave as it leaves her vulnerable to stigma. In taking this position, two of the alternatives she is faced with are to be blamed if she does not subscribe to the desire for a family, or pitied if she does but is unsuccessful in establishing that goal. Positioning career as actively chosen *instead* of relationships is therefore a readily available strategy to circumvent the stigma of solo living. Some women for whom career is very important utilise this strategy, however, they avoid the label of the ‘selfish career woman’ by simultaneously according high priority to other non-work relationships. Adele, who chooses living alone as her first preference and revels in a successful and prestigious career, illustrates this:

> Well [my career is] at the top [of my priority list]. Well no, probably my dogs are the top. Yeah I think the dogs. Then I should be happy and not hurt anyone else or not make anybody else deliberately unhappy, and then the career is part of me being happy. But I wouldn’t want to say it’s
number one or number two, but it’s at the top… Living alone is very suitable for my career. In fact, you couldn’t have the same career living around family or a household or a share house (Adele).

Adele’s dedication to her two dogs and her conviction to cause no harm to others establish that as a ‘career woman’ she also actively cares for others.

Lola, who also derives great enjoyment from her career, demonstrates another way that women navigate through binary constructions of career women:

Before [my health scare] I would have said career was number one [priority]. Yes I remember thinking this: ‘I don’t know if I’m single because I work too long or I don’t have enough time to be with someone; or whether I’m not with someone because I have no time, I work such long hours, that’s why I don’t have someone. Or, do I work long hours because I don’t have someone?’ I don’t know. It’s a chicken or egg sort of thing… In the last twelve to thirteen years I’ve been doing something I really, really love doing. So not the same job, but I’ve had different roles and I’ve loved them. And I love the company I work with. As crazy as it sounds, I actually enjoy going to work! I actually forget to go home sometimes (Lola).

Lola answers her own question on whether she is career focused because she is single or whether she is single because she is career focused, by claiming an alternative position beyond the binary construction. Lola inadvertently challenges the notion that there is a causal and career related ‘problem’ behind her single status by clearly stating that she ‘really really loves’ her lifestyle just as it is.

In the previous chapter I mentioned that within the context of this study, success in the public realm is not associated with gender. This deviation from the norm is compatible with De Vaus and Richardson’s (2009) findings that women who live alone are more likely to be professionals and less likely to be employed in clerical or retail occupations than women who do not live alone, and men who live alone are more likely to be under or unemployed or employed in ‘blue collar’ fields than men.
who do not live alone (De Vaus and Richardson, 2009). This chapter demonstrates that although gender does not impact upon participants’ likelihood of success in the public realm, it does influence the way respondents narrate their success.

**Men and Career**

Male participants are far more likely than women to prioritise career above all else, and not subject to the same level of stereotyping around selfishness if they are successful, are less likely to understand this as a problem. Wal’s story illustrates this and reflects the experience of many participants who describe the working environment as the key locus of their social interaction:

> Yeah effectively [career is my highest priority]. Probably because I give it a higher priority than a lot of other relationships. I mean, strong family ties. I don’t have any strong personal ties at the present, other than really long-term friends that I’ve got, but they all live all over the world… Some of the teams [at work] I’ve been involved with have had in excess of two-hundred people, for whatever reasons, every one of those two-hundred people I would have some interaction with, obviously not on a daily basis but over a two year project I would have some interaction with all of them. [When I’m at home] I don’t ever feel that I would just like to sit down and ring someone because I feel lonely even though I don’t really want to talk to them. I just sort of don’t have a need to talk to anyone because I get all my social interaction during the day at work (Wal).

Others who are required to interact with people within the working environment, such as Sara, describe living alone as a welcome ‘refuge’ from the constant social contact at work:

> My job pretty well defines me, I’ve got to say. I wish it didn’t sometimes. Because like a lot of people who are on their own most of the time, you’d like to think you had a more rounded life sometimes… My home is really a refuge. It’s a real wind down zone. I tend to meet people outside. I don’t tend to entertain… I’ve always worked a lot with people, but not to the intensity that I do now. And I have noticed this increasingly, that my home has become such an important place to chill out because of work. Whereas once upon a time it wasn’t. It’s changed
over the eighteen years. The nature of the job is so intense now and so challenging (Sara).

The contrasts in Wal and Sara’s narratives clearly demonstrate the relative ease with which solo living men are able to construct identity around their careers. Although Sara’s overt claim that her work ‘defines’ her is somewhat unusual, most men and women in this study construct self around workplace identity. As Wal and Sara do, many people describe their work occupying the vast majority of everyday life and, like Lucy, they work long hours:

Like most workers [my job] sucks up the majority of my life. And lately more than usual because I’ve been working an extra day a week in terms of hours, for which, of course, I’m not paid. So it’s a huge part of my life and it’s an exciting, stimulating job. I learn a lot every day. It’s like it fulfils the needs of both my education and social interaction and it’s a great job so, you know, I really enjoy it…

_Do you see your career as linked to your living alone?_ (Ruthie).

Yes and no. Only in the sense that [my new career is] more of a reflection of who I am as a person… My career is related to me and doing something that’s more me, and my living alone is about me as well (Lucy).

Lucy’s story is not characterised by the reserve that participants who could be described as ‘career women’ typically evoke to avoid negative stereotypes. Her fearless structuring of life around ‘me’ can possibly be explained by the fact that she is a long-term, part-time carer for a disabled relative, is pregnant at the time of our interview, and is planning life ahead as a mother. Lucy’s status as carer and expectant mother works to exempt her from being cast as a selfish career woman.

**Work and Identity**

As Rose (1996) suggests, the workplace is a central site around which contemporary citizens construct and confirm identity, and because people who live alone often do not participate in coupled partnerships (the other central site of identity
construction), the tendency to focus upon work may perhaps be more pronounced in solo living individuals. This is illustrated in the stories of participants who experience underemployment or dissatisfaction with work, or those not currently participating in the workforce, who, rather than playing career down, tend to prioritise it above other concerns. Max, a disability pensioner, who works a few hours a week and is currently studying, demonstrates:

Well my career at the moment is working with a wedding photographer. Setting up exterior lights at different locations for his benefit. That to me is up there [on my priority list]. That’s probably my number one responsibility and number one thing that I will attend to. Second after that, or third after that, second after that is myself, and then the third would be my degree (Max).

I showed in Chapter Three with Liam’s story that participants who have experienced difficulty finding satisfactory work placements are required to negotiate the tension between the neoliberal rhetoric of personal choice, their under/unemployment, and living alone. This intersection is fraught with paradoxical schisms and respondents negotiating it often feel directed down a pathway of self-blame. By prioritising the few hours of paid work that he does in a week, Max avoids this pitfall and maintains a positive construction of self.

Luke describes how a period of unemployment influenced his experience of solo living:

I was unemployed for five, six years. It was difficult, but yet again, I was living alone, so you know, well I’d wake up in the morning and just didn’t see any reason to get out of bed. I didn’t get out of bed... So I was unemployed for a whole chunk of time and so this is why I’m sort of saying career is really a big motivator... Career is something I’m very focused on. Well I guess it is my priority but I don’t know if that’s connected to living alone, or connected to the fact that I was unemployed for a big long chunk of time, and like, I’ve got a job now, I’m going to hold onto it (Luke).
Luke’s understanding that living alone facilitated a social withdrawal during his years of unemployment is a common theme. Respondents who are not working tend to find living alone a socially isolating experience, and without recourse to a narrative of success in the workplace they struggle to present positive constructions of solo living.

The Gender Dynamic

In the preceding section I have demonstrated that participants’ narratives bring attention to how gendered hierarchies of success operate within contemporary culture. On the whole, the female participants do not idealise motherhood but instead negotiate a childless position that is acceptable in relation to the cultural valorisation of motherhood. However, their stories demonstrate that as has traditionally been the case, career remains the ultimate cultural marker of success for men while relational roles including motherhood signify success for women. I will return to a discussion of the issue of childlessness in Chapter Seven, but for now flag it as a position that the majority of female participants feel required to defend. Participants’ stories about their careers demonstrate that the gendered hierarchies of success allow women to balance out the deviance of solo living in a way which is not available to men. For women, loving and caring for family members, pets, or other people’s children, provides something of a proxy for the primary identifier of motherhood, and although using career as a recuperative strategy can come at the cost of being cast as selfish or uncaring, women can position themselves as choosing these options. Thus, because choice is valorised as self-actualisation, and career is seen as valuable in the contemporary social world, career provides an effective recuperative strategy for women. Whereas, because
career is at the top of the success hierarchy for men, if they are under or unemployed there is not an equivalent ability to balance the stigma associated with solo living. Presenting themselves as loving and lovable does not work to recuperate men from a failure to achieve success in the workplace. While for the most part they are also unable to narrate success in relationships, male participants who are under or unemployed have very little room to negotiate to avoid presenting as victims of circumstance.

The Neoliberal Working Paradigm

In Chapter Four I demonstrated that Anna is someone who embraces the postmodern condition. She feels that living alone allows her to have a ‘fractured and multiple sense of identity’ and very much enjoys her globalised career which is the central focus of her narrative. As others who describe success in the workplace often do, she considers that living alone is conducive to her considerable workplace success:

If I didn’t live alone I think that would be very distracting [from my career]... I can imagine living with somebody and, you know, career still being important, but I think that becomes tricky when, you know, you’ve got a real case in terms of career, and my career’s been all about that... And I think that’s where it becomes tricky, when it’s a career, and the globalisation of a career, and [mine] really is a very globalised career, you could go anywhere. When one of you wants to move to somewhere and the other one either follows and their career takes a back seat or else you both go where your career takes you, in which case you could end up anywhere... I think that’s the tricky thing about career and living with somebody, is where you’ve both got career things that are taking you all over the place, well, whose career do you follow? ... I’m doing [the work I do now] in part so that I can stay in one place finally because I have been sort of shuttle cocking around the world for a long time. I’ve enjoyed it. It’s been phenomenal but you know, I think there’s only so many times you can restart and still feel, like, I think I’ve had a very broad experience but not very deep in some ways. Because the maximum I’ve ever spent anywhere was four years, which is, you know, a reasonable length of time in a place, but it’s not like meeting friends that you know for fifteen, twenty years… I really like it here... So it
would be career that would take me away if anything does. So, yeah, career is important... but I don’t think it’s the only thing. Well it’s up there [priority wise] but I don’t know that I’m somebody that’s driven, willing to do anything for the sake of a career. I think it’s balanced in with other priorities. But it’s definitely up there (Anna).

Anna’s mobility in the workplace is characteristic of the working trajectories of many participants who follow interstate or international employment opportunities. According to Richard Sennett (2006), experiences of geographically dispersed short-term working contracts are characteristic of the neoliberal working world, and Anna’s feeling that ‘restarting’ has its limits, is not at all unusual.

I pointed out in Chapter One that Sennett’s considerable body of work has significantly focused upon the influence that changing workplace norms are having upon individual lives (Sennett, 1977, 1998, 2006, 2008). In Sennett’s view, the neoliberal workplace has diminished individuals’ efforts to plan their life courses strategically. Bone (2010) discusses the early twentieth century’s ‘Fordist Bargain’ which characterises the ‘old’ workplace against which Sennett contrasts the neoliberal working world. According to Bone, The Fordist Bargain was a market strategy implemented to balance increased production with stabilised demand and to motivate a workforce experiencing the deskilling and intensified workload in the industrialised manufacturing sector. As an alternative to the preceding ‘stick’ of subsistence and uncertainty, the Fordist Bargain offered higher wages, stable employment, and decreased working hours and motivated workers with the lure of consumption and security (Bone, 2010: 728). Complex and insecure everyday working lives thus became more stable. Bauman, Sennett and Bone each argue that the socio-economic changes which have impacted upon the workplace over the past half-century have reversed this trend and working lives have again become insecure.
and uncertain. Sennett suggests that the changes in the workplace transpire at the cutting edge of reform which is as yet narrow, and while all people are subject to the neoliberal value system, the majority of people continue to operate within workplace structures not overly dissimilar to those of the twentieth century (Sennett, 2006: 182).

Around half of the participants describe working lives characteristic of the neoliberal world, marked by continual change and geographic mobility as outlined by Sennett. The other half describe long-term workplace positions and are for the most part geographically stable. This over-representation of participants within the new working paradigm, may be purely coincidental, however, it could suggest, as Anna’s story does, that because participants are often single they are more likely to be in a position to take up distant employment opportunities which could otherwise be incompatible with partnerships. It is also possible that because, like the workplace reforms, solo living is occurring at the cutting edge of social change, participants may be more likely to be among those who gravitate towards less traditional modes of living.

Jen’s story reflects another aspect of working within the neoliberal model. An administrator in her mid fifties, she describes herself as unconventional:

The only reason I work is for the money, I mean if I won lotto tomorrow I’d be happy to give up work. It’s a means to an end. I was a career person probably in my late-teens, early-twenties and then after that [I changed]... I guess [I’ve lived] the nomadic life. Which neither way is right or wrong, it’s just different... I mean in my stage in life now, security is important. It wasn’t up until, even in my mid-forties I still changed jobs at the drop of a hat. I’ve been at [my current job] nearly

---

7 It could also be argued, conversely, that participants are often single because they are required to be geographically mobile for their work.
three years and...now I realise that I do need to stay [where I am] until I retire because of superannuation mainly. But as I say, if lotto numbers came up tomorrow, I would have no hesitation in packing it all in. Have to be a bit more sensible now at my age. Well when I got this job I suppose I’d almost given up on the idea of getting a permanent full-time job again. Because even though my CV doesn’t say how old I am...people get an idea of how old you are. I mean they might be ten years out, but even people at forty find it hard to get permanent full time positions. To actually get a job [where I am now] was a blessing but I’m thinking at the moment that it’s not too much of a blessing. [My workplace is] doing what they started out calling a Professional Staff Review, but now it’s a Professional Services Review and so it’s been going for a year now and for us in [our department], nothing’s been done. We’re all on the edge waiting for it. So this last year’s not been very good. There won’t be any job losses, it’s just out of our hands what’s going to happen to us (Jen).

Jen’s experience of feeling insecure within the workplace, and her understanding of work being all about the money, are themes in stories of other participants’ who are working within the neoliberal workplace model. Sennett argues that the neoliberal working paradigm is too mobile to engender the desire to do something well for its own sake because specialisation in a specific skill can leave workers vulnerable to changes in labour demands. Practices of ‘craftsmanship’ or the development of particular expertises are thus being superseded by a ‘meritocracy’ which celebrates potential ability rather than sustained past service (Sennett, 2006; 2008). For example, an employer could either retrain a fifty-year-old in the latest technologies, or as Jen has discovered, hire someone young and up-to-date, and being the more cost efficient, the latter is the preferred procedure (Sennett, 2006: 96). Jen’s sense that employment mobility has become unsuitable with age is unsurprisingly, therefore, a common theme.

Proponents of neoliberalism persuasively argue that the new notions of work are the way of the future and provide more freedom in contemporary society, but Sennett’s analysis of the many interviews he has carried out with workers, finds that rather
than feeling liberated by the workplace changes, people feel “cast adrift” and fearful about being made redundant in the new “skills society” (Sennett, 2006: 7). Sennett argues that people suited to the new working environment are atypical. He suggests that people who are suited tend to be those who are oriented to the short-term, focused on potential capacity, and willing to discard past knowledge and experience. It could be argued, however, that rather than generally atypical, these qualities are more likely to be typical of younger people. As Jen points out, it was only after her mid-forties that she began to feel the need to secure a stable workplace position, and only now in her early-fifties, that she is facing workplace related anxiety. Because participants range in age between thirty and fifty-five, some were raised within the ‘old’ workplace model and some have only ever known the ‘new’. It could therefore be anticipated that because they have been socialised to suit the neoliberal workplace, the younger cohort may be more compatible with the new model and may feel quite accepting and content to constantly reinvent the working self. However, as Grace describes, younger participants working within the ‘new’ model often feel distressed by their working conditions. In her mid thirties, Grace likens herself to an aggressively entrepreneurial local property owner well known in South Australia, and her narrative is largely structured around her dual home ownership. She characterises a frequently described sense of drifting through the workplace:

I don’t feel like I’ve ever had a career. I’ve always had jobs. I’ve always worked and I still want to figure out what I want to be when I grow up [laughs]. I wish it was higher [on my priority scale]. I always wished I was one of those folks who made a decision in first year [of university study]: ‘Right, I’m going to go and study law [laughs] and become a lawyer’. But I was never hit with anything like that and I just have kept kind of smudging my way through. Hey [laughs], well, I’m a bit frustrated by that fact. I wish I sort of had a bit more artillery as far as, I am trying to apply for jobs now and it is a bit frustrating because of my background is a bit diverse and eclectic …So it’s not, it’s never been a
huge priority but I’m kind of constantly frustrated with myself that I’ve not kind of found more of a focus in, or committed to, an area, so it’s yeah, I’m not really a career person (Grace).

Grace is beginning to foresee that she will need ‘artillery’ to find the financial security she desires. Her ‘diverse and eclectic’ range of skills and aptitude for workplace fluidity should render her an ideal employee within the neoliberal working environment, yet, she describes a difficulty in securing satisfactory employment and a worry about future security:

With job situations looking a bit grimmer I sort of think, ‘Look if worst comes to worst, I can always get forty-five hours a week in a restaurant’. Not that I want to, but that’s, I kind of think I’m probably employable in some capacity… I don’t want to be working in a restaurant all my life, and have juggled that with other work and performing arts work and stuff, hence the restaurant work. But I’m very aware that I’ve got to sort of at least get into another kind of job even if it’s at ground level, just so I can get this sort of training and get broader experience. I can make myself, um, more marketable in the job network sphere. So that’s kind of an immediate concern. Just because I don’t want to be fifty and thinking, nothing wrong with being fifty, but I don’t want to be fifty and trying to get to that next stage... I sort of need to get my skills up a bit more so I’m in a position to earn a bit more money. I’ve gone for a few jobs lately and I haven’t got them and I’ve sort of gone ‘I’ve got two frigging degrees. I’m smart. Why the hell can’t I get a job in a library?’ You know, it’s so frustrating [laughs] (Grace).

Career and Ambivalence

Grace’s experience emphasises the contractions in the neoliberal workplace rhetoric. Encouraged to think that she can make herself ‘more marketable’ by acquiring more skills, doing so prevents her from demonstrating continuity. While she can show to potential employers that she is a flexible, lateral thinker, she cannot show that she is reliable and committed to a particular field. Except in highly specialised fields, being flexible may well preclude being committed, and may contribute to the difficulty Grace and others are having in securing suitable employment. Liam’s story, which I discussed in Chapter Three, runs along similar
lines. Trained as a professional in a now obsolete industry, in his mid-thirties, Liam is now unhappily employed as a manual labourer. He discusses his feelings about work:

There’s been a big psychological drain at work…and plus there’s the pressure of, you know, embellishing yourself with new qualifications all at the same time. I’ve always been very worried about the prospect of unemployment and insecurity from a career perspective. Because of what’s happened to me in the past and because of the way I’ve observed business operating in Australia (Liam).

Although Grace and Liam have grown up with the neoliberal working model, their workplace insecurity is a cause of distress, and as many older participants do, they also desire traditional workplace status and financial stability both now and in the future. Anna is also in her mid-thirties and although she works in a specialised field and has enjoyed considerable success in a globalised and transient career, she now wants to ‘settle down’ to future stability. Among others, Grace, Liam and Anna’s experiences suggest that participants raised under the neoliberal working model seek future security just as the older participants do, and for those who do not work in highly specialised fields, being flexible in the past, or as in Liam’s case, being reluctant to discard hard earned expertise, has made it difficult to find secure and stable work placements.

The anxious and ambivalent approach to the workplace described in the preceding section is common across the respondents’ age range and analogous to many participants’ approach to life in general. Sennett (2006), Bone (2010) and Bauman (2003) each suggest that the dominant workplace insecurity which was characteristic of the nineteenth century has been reignited with neoliberal capitalism’s emphasis on superficial human relationships and the constant restructuring of the workplace. Anxiety and a range of other negative responses
consequently proliferate in today’s social climate. Bone argues that the inherent instability within the neoliberal model has lessened people’s capacity to adequately meet their own cognitive and emotional needs (Bone, 2010: 726). In raising this I am not implying that solo living is indicative of unmet cognitive and emotional needs, but rather suggesting that workplace insecurity and mobility is a possible cause in the high incidence of participants who would like to find and cohabit with partners but have found that difficult to establish. I will return to this point in Chapter Nine in a discussion of the prevalent occurrence of depression amongst participants.

**Summary**

In this chapter I have demonstrated that working life is often a central focus of participants’ narratives. Reflecting broad understandings about the ‘work-life balance’, people often feel that work occupies the majority of their lives. Many respondents’ primary source of social interaction occurs within the workplace, and some people position solo living as a welcome refuge from demanding workplace roles. Some participants construct living alone as beneficial for highly valued career advancement, and others express an ambivalence towards the workplace which is analogous to the ambivalence they feel about living alone. Reflecting the changing workplace dynamics, this ambivalence is far more prevalent amongst people who work within the short-term contract employment of the neoliberal paradigm. Respondents working within the neoliberal work paradigm, while often ambivalent about work, tend to express anxiety about workplace insecurity and a desire for future stability. In this chapter I have also argued that gender significantly impacts upon participants’ negotiations of the junction between career and living alone.
While women are far more likely to problematise the frequent sense of being personally defined by career, their ability to draw on career to negate the deviance of solo living allows them more room than men to negotiate ambivalence. Gendered hierarchies of success which position relationships of nurturing and motherhood as the key markers of success for women and career as the success marker for men, allow women to balance their ‘failure’ to achieve motherhood (or cohabitating with family) with their careers. Because career is the principal symbol of success for men, however, male participants who are under or unemployed do not have the means to counterbalance their narratives. Even so, both men and women utilise workplace identity in positive constructions of solo living, and people who struggle, or do not participate in the workforce, nevertheless strategise to present themselves as valuable in relation to the working world.
Chapter Six - Sex and Solo Living

Introduction

In the preceding chapters I have argued that the contradiction between neoliberal discourses around freedom of choice and the dominant institution of marriage and family, is invariably a key element of respondents’ narratives. In Chapter Five I suggested that because contemporary identity is primarily structured around either coupled partnerships or the workplace, in the absence of cohabiting partnerships, the workplace becomes the central site around which solo living identity is constructed. I also pointed to a connection between the increase in solo living and the changing dynamics of working life and began to demonstrate that the impact this has on solo living is nuanced by socio-economic status and gender. In Chapter Four I argued that because, either intentionally or reluctantly, participants are not conforming to cohabiting coupled norms, other people cannot take their sexuality for granted, and much of the stigma associated with living alone is therefore derived from culturally embedded fears about the dangers and threats of unregulated sexuality. Participants’ stories about being stigmatised reveal the commonly held belief that cohabiting coupled partnerships keep people sexually ‘safe’. Not only is sex that occurs outside of committed partnerships thought of as unsafe in a physical ‘safe sex’ sense, it is also perceived as predatory, exploitative or immoral, and fears about it are inherently linked to living alone. People living with partners would be unlikely to experience the confronting and overt requests frequently made to solo living participants to describe and explain their sex lives. In this chapter I explore how respondents negotiate the association between ‘deviant’ sexuality and living alone, and the different ways that men and women structure narratives about their
sex lives to balance the stigma about solo living sexuality. Within this chapter I also investigate the various cultural discourses pertaining to sex which impact upon solo living individuals and suggest that traditional religious and moral sanctions around sex, although somewhat obscured, have a symbiotic relationship with the contemporary set of social proscriptions which configure sexual experience.

**Hetronormativity**

In Chapter Three I pointed out that about two-thirds of participants would ideally like to establish coupled and cohabiting partnerships. This dominant desire for couple-normativity is reflected throughout this chapter in the framing of sex as a key problem of solo living. Respondents’ descriptions of current sexual desires, infatuations or activities are principally embedded in discourse which sanctions sex within the parameters of committed partnerships and rejects the notion of casual sex, which places the majority of participants’ in one of two problematic positions. Either they are having sex outside the bounds of committed partnerships, or, they are not having sex at all. The following section demonstrates how participants who are not having sex maintain integrity in the face of contemporary stigmas about celibacy, and how those who are having sex negotiate the connotations of having sex outside the boundaries of committed partnerships.

In Chapter Four I demonstrated with Bella’s story, that not having an active sex life is one of the issues about which participants are stigmatised. Philosopher Slavoj Zizek (2011) argues that celibacy is the ‘new taboo’ and people who are not sexually active are cast as unhealthy, undesirable, or lacking an essential human component. Respondents who are not having sex therefore characteristically use my
question about sex as an opportunity to define themselves as lovable and, sexually
‘normal’:

If I meet someone and am in a relationship with them then obviously, I mean, I like sex and I’d love it to be part of my life more than it is. That’s for sure. But having said that, I can cope without it and have coped without it. I wouldn’t have a friend. I wouldn’t bother having a casual relationship with someone. Either I want a relationship with someone or I want a friendship with them. One or the other, I can’t mix the two together (Lucy).

Making a distinction between casual sex and relationship sex, Lucy articulates a very common theme in people’s stories about sex in stating that she is choosing not to have sex at present because she is not currently involved in a committed partnership. By revealing that she likes sex in the context of a relationship, Lucy also asserts that she is lovable and sexually normal. Around two thirds of participants are not currently sexually active and for many this has been the case for a considerable number of years. Some men and women account for their current celibacy by describing a perceived inability to find suitable sexual partners or to initiate sex:

[I’m not having sex] Not now, but I’m looking [laughs]. My last relationship ended [eight years ago]... I actually miss the touch. It’s not just the sex and stuff. My poor cats they probably get a bit too much attention (Holly).

I wouldn’t mind having casual sex, but the opportunity hasn’t presented itself. I’d be very open to it, absolutely. [It’s difficult] - especially when you sit at home most of the time. Funnily enough, they’re not coming to my door. As much as I would like that to happen (Brett).

Holly and Brett demonstrate a gender difference in the source of regret that accompanies their celibacy. While women tend to refer to the missed intimacy and touch, men speak about missed opportunity for sexual activity.
Sexual Euphemisms

An outstanding feature of participants’ discussions of sex is the paradoxical manner in which they discuss the realities of sex. Their accounts are marked by hesitancy and euphemisms. Respondents are typically very open and matter-of-fact about the ‘human need’ for sex, but at the same time, sex itself is very rarely mentioned. Lola illustrates the characteristic awkwardness:

I’ve always had somebody. Not always the same person, but I’ve always had someone. And my theory is, man can’t live on bread alone, and neither can a woman [laughs]. And the ideal thing is, um, this sounds a bit, I don’t know, if I’ve ever needed the need for that I’ve a simple phone call away. So they are always friends. I don’t just go out and pick someone up. I’ve never ever done that, I’ve never done it. It’s always a friend who’s become a friend with benefits if you like, and it’s always when both of us are single. So I would never expect to have this booty call by someone who’s got a girlfriend or a partner or whatever. That hasn’t happened for a while though, because you know the guys I’ve been with have always found a partner eventually and then they break up and then there’s a bit of that [renewed contact for sex](Lola).

Like Lola, around a third of female participants describe having sex outside of committed partnerships. These women go out of their way to emphasise that they are not having ‘casual’ sex, which, by virtue of thirty years of public health campaigns warning of the dangers of casual sex, and the derogatory distinction of sex outside of committed partnerships, is a considerable task. Lola’s repeated references to sex as ‘that’ and her concern that ‘this sounds a bit […]’ suggests she feels inhibited about framing sex as a physical desire. Jasmine illustrates the same reticence:

I have some casual acquaintances but yeah um, there’s a term for it but I don’t want to use it.  
Go on, please do (Ruthie)  
Well I’ve got a couple of friends I can call on in times of need. The F-buddy one [laughs] but I think at my age I’m entitled to do that. Just because you’re living alone it doesn’t mean you have to be celibate. Everyone has needs and wants. It’s human nature (Jasmine).
Lola and Jasmine’s typical hesitance about framing sex as a purely physical desire, could suggest that conceptualising and discussing sex as a ‘human’ need is acceptable, but framing sex as a sexual need, is perhaps not. The frequency of this sensibility in participants’ discussions of sex draws attention to wider cultural discourse around sexuality.

**Sexual Theory**

Richard Parker’s (2009) ‘Sexuality, Culture, and Society: Shifting Paradigms in Sexuality Research’, discusses changes over the course of the twentieth century which saw theoretical approaches to sexuality move from religious to medical and scientific domains. Parker argues that the majority of the early work emerging from these shifts positioned sex as a natural force existing in tension within civilised society (Parker, 2009: 253). Critique informed by feminist theory challenging essentialist assumptions concerning the intrinsic ‘naturalness’ of sexual life, has contributed to the development of a theoretical framework for the social and cultural dimensions of sexual experience. During the past forty years, researchers have investigated the complex ways that communities structure the possibilities of sexual interaction by implementing implicit and explicit rules and regulations which define acceptable ranges of sexual partners and practises (Parker, 2009: 258). Other researchers have demonstrated people’s agency and resistance to structured sexual norms. Brickell (2009) argues that the participants in his study of the changing mores of male homosexuality in New Zealand, exercise resistance in a constitutive sense, by redefining and restructuring sexuality in new ways. Brickell argues that individuals can rework as well as resist aspects of their cultural environments by adopting and deploying new symbols, ideas and practices (Brickell, 2009: 67).
Furthermore, various scholars have demonstrated that there is not necessarily an intrinsic relationship between sexual behaviours and sexual identities, and that sexual conduct can be guided by non-sexual motives, such as the desire for power, money, or belonging (Plummer, 1992; Kennedy and Davis, 1993; Dowsett, 1996; Levine et al., 1997; Weeks, 2000; Kimmel, 2004; Johnson, 2005; Parker, 2009; Brickell, 2009; Jackson and Scott, 2010). Perhaps shedding light on the characteristic awkwardness that participants reveal in their discussions of sex, Parker suggests that an unforeseen cost of the development of theoretical and methodological frameworks for researching sexuality may be ‘a sanitisation of the subject matter’ (Parker, 2009: 261). He points out that one outcome of the growing legitimacy of sexuality research is that sex itself is becoming increasingly absent from the discourse. Social and sexual freedoms gained over the past forty years or so, he argues, exist simultaneously with enduring, silent, and embedded practices of oppression and prohibition (Parker, 2009: 262).

Queer theorists’ concept of hetronormativity, describes entrenched practices of sexual regulation by positing a hierarchical system of sexual values expressed through stereotypes, categorisations, ideologies and taboos, which instil pervasive distinctions between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ sex, and underlie the assumptions and symbolisms which allow heterosexuality to be equated with ‘human nature’ (Warner, 1993: xxi; Rubin, 1984: 280). Banker, Kaestle and Allen (2010) apply queer theory’s hierarchical model to their research on the discursive practices of contemporary ‘hook up’ (or casual sex) culture. Their investigation of the sexual practices of American college students reveals that ‘one-night-stands’ belong at the bottom of the hierarchy of sexual relationships, where relationships that involve
love and long-term commitment reside at the pinnacle (Banker et al., 2010: 186). Love relationships are conceptualised in terms of future and gain, and casual sexual connections, although thought of as beneficial for sexual and social expression within certain social contexts, are described as deficient, of low value, and ‘dead-end’. This is because it is presumed that casual sexual connections are not only unlikely to lead to committed partnerships, but by virtue of their negative impact on ‘reputation’ can also diminish the chances of finding romantic love (Banker et al., 2010: 191). Heldman and Wade’s (2010) study, also inquiring into the culture of casual sex within American tertiary educational institutions, finds the terms ‘booty calls’, ‘friends with benefits’ and ‘fuck buddies’ are commonly used to refer to casual sexual arrangements (Heldman and Wade, 2010: 8). Unlike Banker et al., who find an idealisation of romantic love within the ‘hook up’ scene, Heldman and Wade argue that the culture of casual sex reflects and mobilises a new denigration of, and disinterest in, monogamous emotionally close relationships (Heldman and Wade, 2010: 5). Heldman and Wade suggest that the de-prioritising of traditional relationships may be a middle-class response to shifts in economic opportunity, with individuals who either defer or decide against marriage and family in favour of a career being more likely to participate in ‘hook up’ culture than people who are not in a socio-economic position to imagine the same degree of occupational success (Heldman and Wade, 2010: 8). As Lynn Jamieson (1999) argues, notions of ‘the pure relationship’ into which people freely enter as autonomous beings, and which are dissolved unproblematically whenever the relationship no longer suits one of the partners (Giddens, 1992), are largely confined to the middle class. Although she does not investigate the intimate relationships of the elite, Jamieson proposes that practical, domestic and economic issues remain fundamental concerns within the
intimate relationships of people with less socio-economic capital, and long-term commitment persists as an essential component of many peoples’ sense of security (Jamieson, 1999: 485).

**Women and Casual Sex**

Female participants’ frequent use of the American lexicon outlined by Heldman and Wade, reveals the Australian inculcation of American culture and suggests that the terms provide labels for sexual experiences which would otherwise remain unnamed. Aside from her use of the terminology, like the other women who invoke the American model, Lola expresses an understanding of the low status of her sexual relationships within the conceptual hierarchy of relationships, and establishes her position as being at least above that of people who ‘just go out and pick someone up’. Lola is not currently involved in a sexual relationship, is not concerned by that, and is comfortable to have intermittent sexual relationships with friends when they are available. Her story could be read as a de-prioritisation and disinterest in sex or in coupled norms, however, at the same time, as the following excerpt from her narrative illustrates, it can also be read as an extreme idealisation of coupled relationships:

> For me to allow for anyone to get into my life, that far into my life, it will have to be a commitment. It doesn’t have to be marriage, but it just has to be a permanent commitment. And yeah I just haven’t found that right person... If I did find someone, they’d have to be pretty fantastic because my expectations are really high and I won’t apologise for that (Lola).

It is possible, therefore, that the two seemingly divergent suppositions of Heldman and Wade and Banker et al., regarding the idealisation of, or disregard for, coupled norms being cultivated within the contemporary customs of casual sex, are actually compatible, because respondents such as Lola who describe a flexible approach to
traditional coupled norms, may simultaneously maintain the most idealised versions of coupled relationships. So as well as idealisation of, or disregard for, traditional coupled norms, the current culture of casual sex may also produce ambivalence about coupled norms.

Tracey, who has a current ‘friend with benefits’, illustrates ambivalence about her experience of solo living sex. She hopes to get married and have children in the future and worries that her sexual activity may be a ‘hindrance’ to that goal by making her complacent:

[My friend with benefits is] there and he’s always saying, you know, ‘If you want to come up and spend the weekend’. And it’s an added bonus because we’re friends. It’s not just about [sex]... It’s like sometimes you think, ‘I’d really like to have somebody here’. Because [if you don’t have sex] you miss that closeness with somebody but, you know, it’s helped I think, having [him] there. Sometimes I think it’s either, it’s a help, but I think it’s a little bit of a hindrance as well. So because, you know, you’ve got, ‘Oh no it’s okay’ you know, [he’s] there anyway. But I know that never sort of anything’s going to sort of eventuate with him. We’re quite happy with the friendship that we’ve got. He’s a good sounding board. I’m not comfortable with one-night-stands. I don’t. It’s empty. I just think there’s enough hurt with relationships [laughs] (Tracey).

Believing that her current relationship cannot transform into the partnership that she desires, Tracey firmly establishes it as a ‘friendship’ which is ‘not just about sex’. Tracey’s story brings attention to the competing discourses around sexuality. While she draws on discourses of sexual liberation to describe the sex she has, her concern that having sex outside a committed partnership may lessen her chances of establishing a committed partnership, appears to be located in traditionally patriarchal discourses around chastity and marital fidelity.
Various researchers such as Gail Markle (2008) have identified three dominant discourses which inform today’s popular understandings of sexual behaviours. These are the ‘male sexual drive’, where men are seen to have unlimited and irrepressible sexual desire and capacity whilst women are seen to crave emotional connection; the ‘have/hold’ discourse which positions sexuality within committed coupled relationships, and the ‘permissive’ discourse which sanctions sexuality outside of committed partnerships (Markle, 2008: 46; Banker et al., 2010: 175; Beres and Farvid, 2010). Although participants draw upon all three of these discourses, the ‘have/hold’ discourse which sanctions sex within committed partnerships, is not only dominant, but as I will demonstrate below, it tends to underlie the permissive and male sexual drive discourses, which are most often drawn upon in a recuperative capacity. Melanie Beres and Panteá Farvid (2010) suggest that the version of sexuality that is conceptualised within the ‘permissive’ discourse is embedded within the ‘male sexual drive’ discourse and as I will also discuss in the following section, provides only a very limited space for the expression of female sexuality (Beres and Farvid, 2010: 379). Nevertheless, the permissive discourse circulates widely in contemporary culture, and is consistent with part of a consumer model of sexual lifestyle in which women’s sexual assertiveness and satisfaction is promoted (Markle, 2008: 55). Markle (2008) argues that popular media aimed at women such as the big and small screen productions of *Sex and the City*, promote the understanding that ‘sexually liberated’ women ‘should’ be having sex (Markle, 2008: 55; Beres and Farvid, 2010: 386).
Perhaps influenced by the popular discourse, Julia suggests that she feels that she ‘should’ be having sex. Although she is not currently, she has regularly enjoyed casual sex. She discusses a previous ‘booty call’:

He worked here…but he was in Victoria. So he would be here sometimes and he wouldn’t be here other times. Fantastic…for me and I suppose for him too. Just a reality of life, and we got along fine and we enjoyed each other’s company…When it first happened I thought ‘Oh’ you know, ‘It’s kind of against my’, you know [principles]. [Then I thought] ‘You have to do this and if it feels good go with it’. ‘Give yourself permission’…and even if it’s just sex and nothing else, so be it. And years ago I would have thought ‘It’s just not morally right’ or whatever, or in my set of standards, but that’s changed as I’ve got older and perhaps more mature or just thought ‘Well time’s running out, let’s get on the treadmill and do this’ (Julia).

The majority of women’s stories about casual sex make it very clear that casual sex occurs within the boundaries of friendships, but Julia is encouraged to have sex ‘even if it’s just sex and nothing else’. Julia discussion of the way her ‘set of standards’ regarding sex have changed over the years reflects the fluid nature of sexual discourse. Her feeling that ‘time’s running out’, and her understanding that she needs to ‘get on the treadmill and do this’ suggests that she feels that sex is an obligation that needs to be fulfilled within a certain timeframe. Rather than framing sex as desire or attraction though, Julia positions it as the servicing of a bodily need comparable to that serviced by an exercise bike or a treadmill. Julia’s analogy suggests that she is substituting the ‘real’ thing with ‘what she can get’, which reinforces couple-normativity, and may be partly motivated by the popular understanding that liberated women should be benefiting from their sexuality while they are young and attractive because older women are not socially accorded sexual identity (Gill, 2007: 156).
**Men and Casual Sex**

In contrast to the female participants, male participants rarely mentioned having casual sex. Rex’s comment characterises the attitude of the few men who mentioned they have tried ‘one-night-stands’ in the past:

> I mean the casual encounters and one-night stands and all that stuff, um I’m a bit passed that… I think you need some emotional connection. That’s me anyway. I mean otherwise you may as well just go to a hooker (Rex).

Rick also disregards casual sex because of its lack of emotional content:

> I sort of think ‘Well just for the sake of it, I’m not interested’. And I’m not interested in one-night-stands, or, because usually with me…it’s emotional, it’s just not a straight physical transaction sort of thing. And um, excuse me for saying it, but just sort of that wham, bam, thankyou mam, yep, goodbye. No I’m not into that. I’m not into it at all (Rick).

Most often, as Wal does, men describe sex within the context of past coupled relationships:

> I don’t have any difficulty in instigating a physical relationship that lasts a while, but over the last couple of years I just haven’t had any interest… I’ve had a lot of relationships, but because you move every one or two years with the job, it’s hard to maintain it.

**About how long would you generally maintain them?** (Ruthie)

> About nine months at a time.

**How many have you had?**

> In the last twenty-seven years, probably twenty (Wal).

The meaning of ‘long-term relationships’ is an interesting theme in the narratives of male participants. Noticing that men often refer to sexual relationships as ‘long-term relationships’, I asked Josh about what long-term means to him:

> When you say ‘long-term relationships’ how long do you mean? (Ruthie)

> Twelve/thirteen months.

**How many have you had?**

> Maybe two to three over the past twenty years (Josh).

Tom expressed a similar estimation of the meaning of long-term:
There’s probably been, long-term, maybe half a dozen. How long have they lasted? Ten months, max (Tom).

Rex provides some insight into this understanding of long-term relationships:

Well I suppose the longest one’s sort of about eight years I suppose. I’ve been in maybe sort of four, five that I’ve cohabited with. Um in various, for half-decent periods of time.

*About how long have they lasted? (Ruthie).*

I’d say more than a year (Rex).

Rex implies that he feels a relationship’s longevity defines its ‘decency’. This suggests that the adaptation of the expression ‘long-term’ to include relationships of a relatively short time-span has its basis in a dynamic tension between the understanding that ‘long-term’ relationships provide personal respectability, and the lived and common reality that many relationships are comparatively short lived.

Bernadette Bawin-Legros (2004) argues that fidelity in the contemporary cultural code is understood as ‘for as long as love lasts’, which suggests that fidelity is no longer a function perpetuating the traditional family order. The ‘new fidelity’ Bawin-Legros argues, combines the hope of a ‘forever’ with the knowledge that everything is temporary (Bawin-Legros, 2004: 246).

**‘Outercourse’**

Some men, including Fred and Charles, revealed that they have never been involved in sexual relationships:

I guess not having had one before, an intimate relationship, but um, you sort of wonder how you’d go and [you] get embarrassed by that, and fearful, yeah (Fred).

I’ve never had a serious girlfriend. I think I’m basically shy when it comes to women…I find that hard and I know it’s probably terrible but I’ve been to a strip club a couple of times just so that there is some intimacy. I know lots of people do it that have got partners, but I just find it terrible that I’ve got to do it to get some intimacy. And I think like when I’m there I think ‘This is just great’ but then the next day I feel ten times worse because you think, well, and like obviously at strip clubs and that you can, you can only go so far, like you can look and not
touch basically. Yeah the next day you think, and it made me feel more incompetent if that’s the word. And probably it totally, it more ruins your confidence because you think ‘I’ve got to go to a strip club and pay to be intimate with someone’ (Charles).

Charles’ equation of intimacy with a situation in which he can ‘look and not touch’, and he and Fred’s fear about sex, characterise common themes within the narratives of those male participants who have not had casual sex. Associations between feeling ‘incompetent’ and the use of the visual as a means of sexual expression are discussed by other men, such as Simon, in their use of pornography:

It’s just porn at the moment to be honest, it’s just porn [laughs]. It’s been six years [since I had sex]. It’s always led into a full-on relationship. It always has. Once the sex comes into it, that’s it. It’s, I don’t, I just, I had one throwaway so to speak, because it was a dead cert. A throwaway with a dead cert. They’ve always been over a year. What is a throwaway with a dead cert? (Ruthie)

A ‘dead cert’ means that this person really wants you. It’s a dead cert that there’s going to be sex with her, and a ‘throwaway’ is like, well yeah we’re doing it because we’re pretty, you know, because we’re pretty drunk - alcohol… Look, I mean, I love sex and that’s probably why porn is such a big part of my life. But I think straight away once you get into that, you go ‘Oh I was scared’. I think that you have that one-night-stand but you think ‘Oh god I can’t be that callous’. Because it’s like, well, it’s sort of a performance thing as well. Like you know with your first sex with that person, but at the same time, you know, it’s like I can’t just say ‘Well this is just sex and see you later’, I just couldn’t do that. I think that women do have feelings and regardless of how bad relationships have been, you still don’t want to treat a woman in that respect. And I’m not trying to get all new agey on you, but I’d rather go ‘No I don’t want to root a whole lot of chicks’ (Simon).

Simon reveals an Australian vocabulary of casual sex by describing a personal conflict between his understanding of the rules regarding ‘throwaways’ with ‘dead certs’ and his feeling that he does not want to ‘treat a woman in that respect’. As none of the other participants used these terms I cannot speculate on their wider cultural use, however, the vocabulary appears to mirror the American model in the understanding that casual sex cannot lead into committed partnerships. So at one level, Simon accounts for his celibacy by describing a personal conflict with the
popular discourse. Chris Beasley (2008) argues that because men have not been engaged by ‘critical’ analysis of sexuality, which could offer an alternative to the ubiquitous media imagery presenting sexuality in terms of an item of consumption, men are not encouraged to embrace egalitarian sexual practices (Beasley, 2008). Rosalind Gill (2007) argues that during the 1970s and 1980s, beliefs about male and female equality and the fundamental similarity of men and women were commonplace, but a subsequent resurgence of notions of natural sexual difference have contributed to what she argues is a ‘post-feminist sensibility’. Gill’s examination of contemporary media suggests that a preoccupation with evaluating women’s bodies; pervasive pornographic imagery, and unbridled sexism in the various forms of media have promoted a misogynist cultural undertone which invites men to evaluate women as sexual objects (Gill, 2007: 166). Gill argues that what makes the media culture specifically post-feminist is the entanglement and simultaneous articulation of feminist and anti-feminist ideas; the widespread use of irony to support sexist, racist, homophobic or other oppressive dogmas, and the dominance of the neoliberal language of individualism (Gill, 2007). As Tracey does in recounting her experience with casual sex, Simon reflects the post-feminist sensibility that Gill outlines in his simultaneous articulation of feminist and sexist ideas. He is uncomfortable with the evaluation of women as ‘throwaway’ sexual objects, but as Beasley suggests, he does not have access to understandings which would allow him to critically evaluate the discourse. So at one level, Simon accounts for his celibacy in terms of his understanding that sex inevitably results in a ‘full-on relationship’, which he does not feel ready for, and that he cannot abide the rules of casual sex, and at yet another level, he reveals the ‘performance’ anxiety he experiences with ‘first time’ sex.
Josh also associates fear of first time sex with his use of pornography:

As I said, I met someone, and I was honest with her and told her that I masturbate quite a bit to porn and I obviously didn’t think it was a problem. I’ve been doing it for a long time and she was quite shocked… It’s quite addictive and I have a large collection of porn and this person I met realised that I sort of have an addiction to it… I’m wasting hours and hours at home on my own, yeah masturbating basically. I think it is selfishness basically, because I just want to please myself and yeah, I just didn’t think what effect it would have on a partner… I’d say it was safe, you know. It’s always hard when you’re having sex with a partner for the first time, you know, yeah, things don’t always work, whereas you can always rely on masturbating yourself and getting the end result. So it’s sort of selfish in a way but it’s like a backup I guess. But she pointed out it’s almost like cheating and I can understand what she means by that now. And I’ve always known that it’s been a problem but have never really dealt with it (Josh).

Josh points to a conflict between his sense of ‘addiction’ and his desire to create a cohabiting partnership. His conversation about addiction could be read as either addiction to pornography or to masturbation, both of which may present a challenge to establishing a relationship. Even so, he feels his use of pornography is ‘safe’. Dennis Waskul (2003) argues that the extensive availability of virtual sex provides new and increasingly adopted options to replace sexual intercourse with sexual “outercourse” - which involves interacting with words and images representing the bodies of the objects of desire (Waskul, 2003: 73). Josh and Simon, and as I will show with Tom’s story, suggest that for them, ‘outercourse’ is an emotionally safe option.

Tom’s long-winded discussion reveals his need to share his fears about sex. His persistent hesitance demonstrates the difficulty he has in revealing his underlying concern. When I asked him about sex, he described his uncertainty about a long-term friend whom he feels attracted to and would like to develop a sexual relationship with. I asked him why he felt unsure and he answered:
I think it’s a fear, and I think it’s the fear of rejection as well, because I wouldn’t mind having a, I wouldn’t mind making love to her, I really would, sexually… I just have a fear that once the sex comes into it, it’s a different ball game… The only concern is the, looking for better words, lack of practice and actually trying to satisfy a woman’s needs as well, because that’s one of my greatest fears is, and I’m seeing sexual people about this, is um trying, I don’t um, not to get too personal, um, one of the things that it is that I don’t, is I try and please, and I’ve been told off for this, is try and please a woman before pleasing yourself, that’s all. That’s all. I don’t know why… The only issue I have. I’m not too sure what your other studies have said, but I’m not too sure, the only thing I do have, well a problem I suppose, is then, is the actual sex part itself, when you’re actually, your frustrations with it, right, and so, when you don’t have sex for a while, I’m not sure how other people, what they do, because you actually can get yourself trapped and actually um, well I have done it, you know well find a prostitute or something like that just to relieve yourself and just whatever. I’ve actually been, well you know, masturbate much more than you ever have before and I’m pretty sure women do exactly the same thing. It’s just frustrating. It’s just hormones. We’re all different, I’m sure of it. Some women need it seriously everyday and some women are turned off it and that type of stuff and men are exactly the same, don’t get me wrong. So, yeah, you do, and I don’t see anything wrong with that. The only thing is, with you asking me about ‘on your own’ and that type of stuff and…what I’m saying is if I do whatever I have to do to relieve myself, I’ll do it. The only thing I feel guilty about is in the past I haven’t been able to really, I’ve been told I’m a great lover, but anyway, yeah great, fine, but I haven’t really had, but I haven’t really had, I don’t feel, I lack confidence in my lovemaking at times (Tom).

Although he does not quite label it, Tom appears to be worried about premature ejaculation. His difficulty in revealing this concern, his curiosity about what the other participants in the study said, and his revelation that he is seeking ‘expert’ assistance, suggests that Tom’s fears about sex are located in worries about whether he is sexually ‘normal’.

**Post-Feminist Sensibilities**

Rosalind Gill (2007) argues that the post-feminist media culture promotes a hyper-vigilant version of the Foucauldian self-policing gaze. She argues that women are particularly vulnerable to the directives of the ‘makeover takeover’, as the post-
feminist media culture grants women sexual agency on the condition that they use it to construct a self which resembles the heterosexual male fantasy found in pornography (Gill, 2007). Janice Turner (2005) argues that the boundaries between pornography and real life have become increasingly blurred:

Once porn and real human sexuality were distinguishable. Not even porn's biggest advocates would suggest a porn flick depicted reality, that women were gagging for sex 24/7 and would drop their clothes and submit to rough, anonymous sex at the slightest invitation. But as porn has seeped into mainstream culture, the line has blurred. To speak to men's magazine editors, it is clear they believe that somehow in recent years, porn has come true. The sexually liberated modern woman turns out to resemble -- what do you know! -- the pneumatic, take-me-now-big-boy fuck-puppet of male fantasy after all (Turner, 2005: 2)

Although Gill concentrates on the negative impact of the post-feminist discourse on women, it is possible that post-feminist sensibilities also have a considerably negative impact on men. It is significant that all of the men who discussed a fear of sex also discuss their consumption of pornography or other mediums of virtual sex. The sexually liberated modern woman, as depicted in *Sex and the City* and in the publications that Turner describes, would seem to be a potentially daunting prospect. First time sex with women who are thought to be confident and out to satisfy themselves (particularly in the context of the culture of casual sex where sex precludes love), drastically raises the potential for rejection. The tendency of male participants to rule out casual sex because of its perceived lack of emotional content may therefore mask a fear of failure and the threat of rejection. Casual sex may be more threatening because, presumably, if an emotional connection exists where acceptance and trust have been built, sexual partners are more likely to extend understanding about less than perfect ‘performances’. 
Pornography

McKee, Albury and Lumby claim in *The Porn Report* (2008) that a political alliance formed between religious conservatives and radical feminists during the 1970s brought about an unprecedented vilification of pornography. They dispute claims that pornography might destroy relationships, lead to addiction, or encourage the objectification of, or violence towards, women, and argue that any positive effects of pornography are as yet unknown because they have never been studied (McKee et al., 2008). Despite the lack of investigation into benefits of pornography, *The Porn Report* offers a positive understanding of the increasing use of pornography and claims that women constitute around forty percent of Australian consumers. In view of McKee and colleagues’ findings, it is interesting that none of the female participants in this study discussed pornography, virtual sex, or masturbation whereas around a third of males did so. This may point to the ‘male sexual drive’ discourse which allows men the space for gratuitous sex and its discussion, and embedded cultural sanctions which prevent women discussing their engagement with means of virtual sex.

The different approaches taken by male and female respondents to solo living sex illuminate the gendered, complex and multi-layered discourses around sexuality. When not positioned within the context of committed relationships, men tend to describe visual representations as an avenue for sex, while women tend to describe sex in terms of friendships and touch. Each of these positions can be understood as recuperative strategies. In the preceding section I have proposed that recuperation from the stigma associated with not having sex is most frequently achieved through describing past sexual partnerships which confirm ‘normal and healthy’ sexual
desire, and ‘choosing’ to refuse sex that is not in the context of committed partnerships. The understanding that casual sex, or sex which occurs outside the boundaries of committed partnerships, is likely to be predatory, emotionless, exploitative and dead-end, provides a strong defence for sexual inactivity. Men who are not having sex also demonstrate that they are sexually ‘normal’ by discussing their engagement with various mediums of solo or virtual sex. Women who are having sex work to demonstrate that they are sexually ‘moral’ by typically describing the sex they do have as that which occurs within the boundaries of friendships. Participants thus make it clear that they are not having ‘casual’ sex, and by so doing, they provide a powerful reinforcement of the couple-normative status quo.

The contrasts between men and women’s framing of sex points to an influence which restricts women’s freedom to discuss sex as a purely physical need, which is in contradiction to the post-feminist representation of women as sexually confident and out to satisfy themselves. Nevertheless, unlike the male participants, women did discuss having sex outside of committed partnerships. It is possible that men did not disclose the casual sex they may be having, and if this was the case, it could have been that they did not feel comfortable speaking to me about it, or it could be based in cultural mores restricting men from speaking to women about their ‘real life’ sex lives. The differences between men and women’s discussions of sex suggest that the replacement of sexual interactions with sexual representations is an option more acceptable to men than it is to women, and although virtual sex is seen as a ‘safe’ option for some men, their consumption appears to intimidate them and reinforce fears about real sex. In this way, highly sexualised post-feminist representations of
women, may widen gaps in understandings between men and women about who they are sexually, and what they want sexually, and both strengthen and expand upon the individualistic, conservative, neoliberal agenda. The obvious difficulties of establishing sexual relationships which do not conform with coupled norms under these cultural conditions, may significantly contribute to the high incidence of participant celibacy and suggest the contemporary rules of casual sex are integrated within and informed by neoliberal power.

**Sex and Power**

Chris Brickell (2009) argues that power defines, regulates and constitutes sexuality while also undergirding sexual inequalities. Brickell proposes that researchers have most often investigated the definitional, regulatory, constitutive, and unequal dimensions of power in isolation and argues that taking an approach where all four facets and their interrelationships are taken into account provides a framework for understanding contemporary multiplicities (Brickell, 2009: 57). Following Brickell, then, solo living sex is arguably impacted and shaped by various sources of power. One of these sources of power is the definitional power of deeply entrenched cultural assumptions about the weird, dangerous and unregulated potential of solo living sexuality, and social norms which engender the expectation that people should be sexually ‘healthy’ and active. Another is the regulatory power of moral sanctions and sexual norms supported by the state through medical and other public policy. A further source of power impacting upon solo living sex is the productive and constitutive power of neoliberal and post-feminist discourses, and the free-market economic model’s infiltration into the private realm. Combined with the unequal power discursively and symbolically discriminating against sex which
occurs outside of coupled norms, the various sources of power influencing solo living sex renders solo living sex complicated, shaped by a multitude of forces, and restricted on a number of levels.

The neoliberal emphasis on the family unit mobilised by the language of individualism, and the relationship between this and the post-feminist sensibility engendered by the mass media, appear to inform the culture of casual sex, which, while liberal at some levels, is perhaps far more restrictive than ideas and practices of casual sex popular during the latter decades of the twentieth century. Social researchers such as Kern (2010) argue that the success of the neoliberal social project depends upon institutionalised fear, as the dynamic interface between autonomy and fear is a profitable site for the production of consumer needs (Kern, 2010, 209). This tension between fear and freedom characterises the contemporary culture of casual sex, which, by simultaneously sanctioning and regulating the possibilities of sexual contact, surreptitiously reinforces couple-normativity. The combination of the current designation of casual sex as that which is unable to transform into committed partnerships, and the understanding that having casual sex inhibits the creation of committed partnerships with other potential mates, reinforces the sex-as-danger discourses and contributes to the high incidence of current sexual abstinence among participants. Thus, the understanding that people ‘should’ be having sex, and the sanctions around having ‘casual’ sex, work to reinforce the imperative to engage with normative modes of coupling.
Resistance

With all that said, it is important to draw attention to the small minority of participants who construct sexual identity around the contravention of dominant sexual mores. Adele’s decision to ‘give up’ sexual relationships indefinitely, falls within this category:

In 2000 I cut off relationships altogether, well, sexual intercourse relationships. The two [men I told you about are both very close friends], but no sexual intercourse occurs due to lack of interest on my part, and on the gay one, of course [laughs]. No I choose not (Adele).

I demonstrated in Chapter Four that Adele feels empowered to embrace and thereby disable negative stereotypes. Adele’s success and high social status may provide her with confidence to boldly defy the directive that she ‘should’ be having sex. Anna who also belongs in this category enjoys considerable success in the workplace too. Her story was also used in Chapter Four to characterise those who feel empowered to embrace, and in so doing, nullify stereotypes. In her mid-thirties, Anna explains that her sexual relationship with a younger man provides her with a ‘fun’ avenue for transgression:

At the moment I’ve got a thing going on with a really inappropriate guy. He’s twenty-four, which is wonderful and awful. Yeah, what the hell. He’s lovely but he’s, I mean I shouldn’t complain about this, but my god, he’s such a kid, but you would be, he’s twenty-four. But even for twenty-four you know [laughs]. And it’s wonderful because it’s so casual because I know there can never be anything with it. Well, relationship wise…but it’s nice because he comes and he stays over and we’ll cook and we’ll watch a video and we’ll go to bed and have great sex. Twenty-four-year-old sex (Anna).

Anna’s description of her lover as ‘a really inappropriate guy’ suggests that she is trading appropriateness for ‘twenty-four-year-old sex’. She discusses how this differs from ‘relationship sex’:

It’s a bonus especially because like the ex is forty this year. Next year. It was always very, and possibly this was just about us being in such a heavy relationship, it never ever felt like we could just have kind of fun
sex. We always had relationship sex. You know, it’s just, it’s all about ‘us’ and all this stuff. That’s not always what you want. Sometimes you want, you know, this is terrible, I love this because I teach and I teach him … and I love arriving there thinking ‘Two hours ago I was lying in bed with my little boy’. You know, and I’m teaching all these students that have got no idea about this. And you know, I teach [an upper level] course as well, and they’re all adults, and I wouldn’t tell them because it’s none of their damned business but it’s just this sort of delicious little knowledge that yeah, yeah, yeah, which is good (Anna).

Anna implies that the transgression and secrecy of her current relationship provides her with ‘fun’ that she did not find in a ‘heavy relationship’. Anna appears to enjoy the disruption she imagines her relationship presents to normative sexual arrangements and finds fun in the fact that she is her lover’s teacher, which constitutes a further transgression and a real risk. As I have demonstrated above, participants’ lack of heteronormative status tends to render sexual transgression problematic. Another group of interviewees may have included very confident transgressing such as involvement in bondage and discipline or swingers clubs, but this is not the case here. The majority of participants desire ‘normal’ status, and this is particularly so in relation to sexuality. Those who do transgress sexual norms, such as Adele, Anna, and as I will demonstrate below, Jessie, also embrace negative stereotypes. While Adele and Anna’s high workplace status may empower them to do this, Jessie, who is a middle-income earner and not especially interested in career, takes a different approach.

Jessie’s unconventional sexuality is central to her narrative, as is the ‘tri-sensual’ nature of her relationship which she describes in the following way:

I should probably mention that we’re not monogamous… probably the three that I’d call significant relationships [were not monogamous]. But I’ve had sexual relationships with quite a number of other people that I wouldn’t call significant [laughs]. It’s informed consent, which is why I tend to say it’s non-monogamous rather than an open relationship because people have an instant perception of open relationships, is when
you’re out shagging every other weekend, which isn’t the way it happens. It just means that I’m, we both know about each other’s sexual partners and we have a veto list… There’s a couple of blokes that he’s put on my veto list, that I can see why he’s done it. But the big advantage for me is that they would have been a pushover [laughs]. I wouldn’t have had to work very much for them [laughs]. Mostly it’s relatively casual, not one-night-stands as a rule. Most of mine have been interstate which probably make it easier for him. Interestingly enough though, we both read Heinlein8 quite intensively and he has several models of non-monogamous relationships which I think possibly is where the basis of ours comes from (Jessie).

Jessie and her partner are both solo living self-professed hoarders, and this is partly why they each intend to continue living alone. As a hoarder who lives alone and actively articulates a strong dislike for children, Jessie is at a real risk of being categorised an eccentric who is impossible to live with. Yet, she appears to delight in revealing her unconventionality. In detailing her relationship she claims that its ‘tri-sensual’ nature affords her a degree of control which is not available to those involved in traditional relationships. She presents her relationship as being beyond couples and asserts that she is liberated from a constrained model of cohabiting couples. Jessie embraces the notion that she can be anything she chooses to be, and constructs her identity around breaking sexual convention. Jessie’s negotiation of her stigmatised position in relation to transgressive sexual practices is unusual. Although Adele and Anna are also transgressing sexual norms, and they do so whilst embracing stereotypes of solo living, Adele’s identification as a ‘spinster alone with dogs’ and Anna’s identification with ‘women who live alone with cats and teapots and stuff’ are relatively benign when contrasted to Jessie’s identification as a hoarding, child-despising, sexual transgressor. Many respondents embrace notions of chosen and fluid identities and breaking social conventions, but unlike Jessie’s rebellious approach, most people balance this by fortifying their status with

8 Robert Anson Heinlein (1907–1988) was an American science fiction writer.
socially sanctioned success in the public or private realms. Perhaps pointing to sexuality as a pivotal point of contemporary power, many participants identify as unconventional, rule breaking, choosing, autonomous individuals, but it is a small minority who describe taking this approach into the sexual realm.

Summary

In Chapter Four I argued that hegemonic coupled norms generate the assumption that people who live together have sex together, so when there is an absence of a regular partner, a suspicion is raised that solo living is due to ‘deviant’ sexuality. This chapter has demonstrated that participants therefore feel required to demonstrate that they are sexually ‘normal’. This is most often achieved in hesitant euphemisms which verify that they like sex, have in the past or are currently having sex, and explain current celibacy in terms of an existing single status. With the exception of men’s discussions of pornography and masturbation, framing sex as a purely sexual need or desire appears to be restricted by cultural embargos which work to perpetuate coupled norms as the rightful domain of sex. The multi-layered discourses around men and women and sex is complex. While all the old discourses are still at play, they are layered with simultaneously liberating, and covertly oppressive, complicating new ones.
Chapter Seven - Friends, Family and Living Alone

Introduction

In this chapter I explore respondents’ stories about their interconnections with friends and families. I argue that participants’ understandings of the influence of early family life on their current lives, and their experiences of creating their own families, or (for the majority of participants,) not creating families, highlight the common acceptance of both life stage discourse and psychoanalytical discourse locating the genesis of personality in childhood experience. Employing discourse about the formative influence of childhood on adulthood facilitates participants’ negotiations through the contradiction between the discourse of choice, which as I have shown, is a principle of many participants’ narrative approaches to living alone, and life stage discourse. The popular idea of life stages can be traced to life course theory, which involves an age-graded progression of socially defined roles that are performed within the context of particular spatial and temporal social locations (Elder, Johnson and Crosnoe, 2003: 4). Experts in the life course field during the 1950s and 60s proposed that if a person does not achieve a successful ascension to each ‘stage’ in life, they remain ‘immature’, and either mentally or emotionally undeveloped (Young, 1977; Ehrenreich, 1983: 20). While life course theory has moved on from this proposition, I will demonstrate in this chapter that ideas about appropriate life stages for solo living not only continue to influence popular discourse, but also feed into the institution of marriage and family, and in turn, into discourse around nation building.
In this chapter I also begin to point towards a link between social disadvantage and social isolation, which I discuss in the following chapter. The link between social isolation and disadvantage is notable within participants’ constructions of their friendship groups, however, it has no perceivable influence on their experiences of family. Respondents’ relationships with their families of origin fall into four types irrespective of their current level of social advantage, or whether they depict the socio-economic positions of their families as working, middle, or upper class. On the subject of friends, around a quarter of the participants describe interacting on a regular basis with a large group of people who they consider to be close friends. A further quarter of participants describe a relatively solitary lifestyle with the social connection they do maintain often occurring within institutional arenas such as the workplace rather than with independently established friends. The remaining half of the participants describe neither especially active, nor particularly isolated, social lives, and tend to maintain a few close connections and then a wider social group with whom they socialise intermittently.

**Active Friendship Networks**

The respondents who describe large friendship networks typically suggest that solo living provides them with an arena in which to break both the conventional modes of interrelating and traditional constructions of personal identity. Drew exemplifies the commonly expressed view that solo living improves the quality of his social connections:

> I think in some respects my social life is probably enhanced [by living alone]. When I feel that I need to make contact with people or be around people, then of course I have to generate it…As far as intimacy with different people in different contexts goes, the fact that I’m single and therefore have to go seek companionship from time to time probably means that I do so with a little bit more gusto than I might if I had my
intimacy needs met within my household for instance. In fact, I know people that when they’ve broken up out of relationships have found it quite difficult to re-establish friendships and so on because they’ve come to rely solely on their partners to be the person that they bounce everything off…I do have intimate connections with a range of different people and I feel satisfied in those by and large…When I seek company I feel that my relationships are reciprocal in the sense that the people I choose to spend time with, give a lot of themselves and I feel I give a lot of myself to those relationships as well (Drew).

Drew critiques the common tendency to prioritise romantic love to the detriment of other relationships. He finds that living alone encourages him to be more attentive to a wider range of relationships than he might be if he were cohabitating. Drew suggests that living alone, or in particular, being single, allows him a sense of freedom to pursue his social world with ‘gusto’. Along the same lines, Anna mentions that living alone allows her a degree of liberty which she feels would be impeded by living with others:

I also think because I’ve got lots of different groups of friends and I’ve friends that I talk about intellectual type things with, and I’ve got other friends that I talk to about boys, and then I’ve got other friends that I talk to about what rubbish is on TV or whatever. And I can’t imagine wanting to live with any one group of them... I think it’s difficult to choose who I would live with. I think living alone allows you to be lots of different people in different communities of practice. And that’s the reality of how my life is. It allows you to be a sort of shattered identity or multifaceted identity (Anna).

As it is for Drew and others with a large circle of close friends, the freedom of solo living is central to Anna’s approach to social life and to her sense of personal identity. She suggests that living with others would cause her identity to be fixed and bound to those cohabiting others, and living alone allows her to expresses her sense of multidimensionality and to realise a multifaceted identity. Participants with active social circles, who are often those who choose living alone as their first preference, characteristically suggest that they are seeking to move away from
established social and relational norms to create identities beyond conventional modes of being.

**Social Isolation**

At the other end of the spectrum, the group of participants who describe a socially isolated experience tend to have their primary social connection with family members or with people in institutional settings such as the workplace. These people tend to be, but are not always, among those who are disadvantaged by under or unemployment or by a disability. In Chapter Three I discussed Liam’s struggles to find a suitable position within the workforce. Here, Liam describes his somewhat solitary lifestyle:

Well there aren’t any [close friends]. I had two friends in my early days. I was best man at both of their weddings. The first one I haven't seen for a long time and the second one who I continued to see for quite a period of time, up until just recently, but I decided that it was running, it had been running dry for a long time and we were growing differently you know... There’s probably only a couple of people in [my wider social circle] at the moment and those are people that I’ve met just recently too (Liam).

Wes describes a similar experience:

I have one, perhaps two [close friends]. I talk about this one person, but I haven’t seen this one person for probably four or five months now. *Do you keep in touch by phone? (Ruthie)*

Yeah, probably once every two, three or four weeks perhaps, nothing sort of set (Wes).

Wes feels that his employment in the mining industry, which requires him to be away from home for regular and extended periods, has set the pattern of his social interaction and restricted his ability to form or maintain close friendships:

Because I might be away for two or three weeks at a time, the first thing I want to do when I get home is just complete silence. Complete sort of don’t want anyone around. Because you just want to get home, relax, and yeah you just don’t have to worry about anything. The phone gets turned off... [At work we have] single accommodation quarters. You’ve
got your own single bed, yeah small room, toilet, shower and stuff. You know you go and have breakfast, or tea, lunch, and you’re surrounded in a great big mess hall where there might be three or four hundred people sort of thing. So it’s that sort of one extreme to another. You can be incredibly isolated if you want. You know, you can go back to your room and close the door and not see anyone. [I work] very much on my own. You work with people for sure, but you’re probably very much on your own… Because if you’re away for two or three weeks, it’s extremely difficult to try and pick up the pieces of what people have been up to, and it’s […] Oh I used to have great friends. You know, really good friends you used to get out and about with and do things and catch up when you’re home, but yeah, they’ve all got different lives and they’re all married now or got children, and it’s all my sort of age group, people I went to school with and they’re all at that sort of stage and I think it’s a bit of a trade-off because of the way I work. I don’t know whether it’s because I work up there. Is it because I’m single or live alone, or it’s just the, you know, the circumstances of my choice up there or would it be different if I wasn’t working up there? (Wes).

Respondents who describe very little social interaction are likely to be those who have not chosen to live alone and are also socially disadvantaged in some way, but as Wes’ story demonstrates, respondents find themselves feeling socially isolated for a variety of reasons. Aside from the circumstances of his employment, Wes’ understanding that his former friends’ movement into marriage and childrearing has caused a disconnection between him and them is a distinctive theme among the stories of all but the quarter of respondents who describe very active social lives. As others do, Wes explains his sense of separation from the social world by drawing on the discourse of ‘life stages’.

**Typical Friendship Networks**

The participants who describe neither isolated nor particularly active social lives are often, but certainly not always, those who choose living alone as a second preference to cohabiting with an as yet unmet partner. Typically they spend between four and six nights at home alone, and have four or five people with whom they keep in fairly regular contact, which often includes family members, and then,
as described by Claude, a social group they connect with for celebratory, sporting or
collegial events:

Outside of family there would be two others [I’d consider as close friends]. I spend a few hours each weekend with my parents and
probably a few hours each fortnight with my sister, and with, actually, physically, with the two close friends, once a year, because one of them
lives in Sydney and one of them lives in Perth …I go to the football
with [a group of friends] and meet at the pub before going to the
football. And one of the guys there I went to uni with and we’ve been
friends for a pretty long time. So sometimes we talk about more
personal stuff, but not all that often. It’s just more a blokey mateship
thing than anything else. Then apart from people who I do, well go to
sport with usually, a lot of my friends are interstate… With a couple of
them there’s a lot of email contact, but not the really personal sort of
stuff. More just jokes. Still I’m catching up with people and telling what
you’ve been doing and that sort of thing (Claude).

There is also a gender difference among the participants in the way they socialise
with friends. Male participants’ wider social groups tend to be focused around
sporting events, while female participants often connect after hours with work
colleagues. As they are for Claude, the people who participants feel closest to are
frequently geographically dispersed and relationships are conducted on the phone,
the internet, and on holiday visits, but are nonetheless understood and experienced
as strong intimate ties.

In Chapter One I mentioned that the trend towards living alone is often thought to
be at the leading edge of social change. In the main, living alone is either theorised
as symptomatic of decreasing connections between people in an atomising social
world, or as an indication of a liberating and democratic transformation of the
private realm. Respondents’ narratives of interconnections with their friends and
social groups suggest that to some extent, both these theoretical propositions hold
weight. The group of participants who describe busy and active social lives, can be
imagined as pioneers on the edge of liberating social change, and those who
describe an experience of social isolation, can be understood as subjects of a fragmented social world. However, congruent with Jamieson’s (2009) proposal that there is a need for further understanding of the trend, the majority of participants, fall between these positions, and can neither be read, nor do they position themselves either at the frontier of social change, or as disconnected from the social world.

Family

Along the spectrum of connectedness with family, participants range from those with very interactive involvement with their families, to those who do not have families or do not communicate with their families. On the middle ground, some participants describe detached relationships with their families with whom they have minimal involvement, and others sustain long-distance close relationships with their families. Those who describe an active involvement with their families are invariably geographically and emotionally close and rely on them for regular mutual support. Parents or siblings often help out with addressing crises or domestic responsibilities and siblings also sometimes feature strongly in their social worlds. At the other extreme are those respondents who either have no surviving family or have become estranged from their family. Despite this, absent families are sometimes important elements in these participants’ narratives. Others have close relationships with family, but typically due to interstate or international relocation for employment, are geographically separated from them. These people range from those who keep in fairly regular telephone contact, to those who frequently travel interstate for family celebrations and commonly maintain daily contact on the phone. The remaining participants maintain some contact with their families but
they neither draw on them for support nor do their families feature strongly in their narratives of day-to-day life.

**Legitimating Solo Living**

Popular understandings of the impact of childhood on adult life, are reflected in the way that participants frequently link living alone to childhood circumstances and influences from their family of origin. Participants associate living alone with characteristics of their childhoods including being an only child, coming from single parent families, experience of tension or violence between parents or siblings, the influence of mothers with feminist ideologies, or feeling a sense of isolation within their family.

Perhaps pointing to the influence of second wave feminism in the trend toward solo living, Grace and Jasmine provide examples of a theme evident in the narratives of some female participants, where living alone is linked to maternal influences:

My mother drilled it into me never to be reliant on anyone else for money so I kind of thought ‘I’m not going to be’... So that’s probably my mum, kind of, you know, she came from that era where, you know, got married, had kids, and relied on a husband to provide, and so her frustration in perhaps losing control or not having control properly. I took that on board, and maybe to the nth degree [laughs]. So maybe my mother has more of an affect [on my solo living] than any kind of career (Grace).

I come from a family with a lot of strong single women. Through divorce or death of a partner or whatever, it’s just worked out that way...So Mum set a good example, I guess, for being self-sufficient and providing for us. I’ve seen my father twice in my adult life so it’s not really a factor. My grandmother’s husband died when my mum was sixteen so she lived and brought up five kids...and right up until she died, she was living on her own and looking after herself in her own place, and I think we all intend to follow suit (Jasmine).
As does Jasmine’s story, Drew illustrates the theme of those who suggest that being raised in single parent households has influenced their solo living. Drew explains how as a child he developed conflicting feelings about his father’s single status:

Because I was raised in a single parent household, my dad, from most of my life when he had me, he was single, and I must admit that it did used to concern me, thinking that my dad was, from my perspective as a child and adolescent and young adult, that he was going to be alone forever. So I guess in that sense it’s where I fell into that kind of stereotypical kind of perspective of viewing my dad as being alone and in need of someone to be around him. Having said that, he didn’t appear in any way to be lonely, in fact, he seemed quite self-resilient and self-fulfilled. So I needn’t have feared. He’s passed away now, but I do remember when I was younger thinking ‘I hope my dad’s not going to be alone all his life’ because he lost my mum when I was a small child, so it did used to occur to me. But I don’t know if it would have occurred to me if it hadn’t been put into my head by other people always making a fuss around him, about his perceived singleness... I did think he was a bit of a hermit figure because he did spend a lot of time by himself... But I remember thinking of it as quite a romanticised figure as well. He didn’t appear singular. He seemed quite complete to me and quite content as well... He did not look like a man that was deficit in any way as a result of living a lot of his life by himself, in his own company. In fact, he seemed quite secure in that, quite strong... So I think in a way, I was inadvertently socialised into being quite a resilient, self-reliant, type of individual... I think I did pick up a role model that it was feasible and permissible to live with yourself by yourself, so to speak, without falling to pieces or feeling less than in anyway... So, I do think that family background is a big one (Drew).

Drew imagines that his father’s example made it ‘permissible’ to live alone. Tracing his ambivalence about solo living into early life, Drew points out that the ‘fuss’ people made about his father’s ‘singleness’ when he was a child, gave rise to a concern which was in direct contradiction to his own perception of his father as ‘strong’ and ‘complete’.

In contrast to Drew’s modelling of a self-sufficient rather isolated parent, Luke and Lucy demonstrate that some respondents feel that fractious relationships between parents within their family of origin have played a role in their solo living:
My mother and my dad tended to, you know, while I was growing up arguing was a recreational activity. Then I realised it was actually a type of foreplay but when you’re five you don’t get that. And I know when I was four and five it would stress me out, you know, they would argue a lot. But somewhere around the age of five it kind of clicked that it had stopped stressing you out and just do your own thing. I know that ever since [I’ve thought] ‘I don’t want to have to go through this again. I’ll avoid it’ (Luke).

I had a very dysfunctional family when I was young and became a bit of a loner because of that, and I think I still am… [Mum and Dad had a] very, very unhappy marriage. So for religious reasons or ethical reasons they stayed together to everybody’s detriment really. So do you see a link between that and your solo living now? (Ruthie).

Oh definitely. That shapes, you know, my personality now. There’s no doubt about it. And it shaped my being a loner and always feeling different. I mean I know all kids go through that, but I really was different. I was going home to a war zone every night of the week and yet pretending I wasn’t at school (Lucy).

Lucy’s classification of herself as a ‘loner’ in childhood and her ongoing identification with that title into adult life is quite common. Lola also claims the title ‘loner’ and links it to her childhood:

I’m a loner in life I guess. I’m an only child. I had a brother who passed away when [he was a young adult and I was a young teenager] so I pretty much grew up my adult life as an only child. Only child, I’m single, so I’ve had a very sort of, I’ve got a lot of friends, but I just like to be able to shut my door and have my own solace (Lola).

The connection Lola makes between her status as an ‘only child’ and solo living is echoed in other people’s stories. Joel provides a further example:

I sort of got accustomed to [being alone] as an only child and I got this sort of, as well, on top of that was this sort of desire for freedom and to just be able to do whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted. So I think that sort of shaped my attitude to loneliness that I have now (Joel).

Conversely, participants also link childhood relationships with siblings to their current solo living. Factors they identify as causal include large differences in age, fractious or violent relationships, or sharing crowded spaces with brothers and sisters. Shannon describes how she feels that her relationship with her siblings, as well as her relationship with a ‘strict’ father, has shaped her solo living:
Growing up I was the oldest and the oldest by a few years. They’re six, eight and twelve years younger than me. I always think that comes back to me being a bit solitary and probably why I do like living on my own... It wasn’t like we fought all the time or anything like that, but it was like, me and them, type of thing... I always found it hard at home with noise and things like that. I always wanted to have my music on and my father’s quite a strict man and if he wants the TV on the TVs on, and that’s something that I accept but when I was younger it used to upset me as well. Like, you know, ‘Just occasionally can’t I have something?’ Like I think that’s why, one of the reasons why I do live on my own. It’s just not to feel that again, you know, always not having what you want.

Joanne explains that living alone ‘formalises’ the sense of aloneness she has experienced since childhood:

This might be a bit of an extrapolation, but through knowledge from other people I know of who are transgendered, and what I can remember, the bits I can remember from my childhood, that in some respects, even though I lived with my family, in some respects I was living alone anyway. Because there was a lot of things about me that I was feeling inside that I wasn’t telling anyone... I guess I’m aware that I did live in a world of my own and was a, and have always been a daydreamer. So I guess in some respects [living alone is] almost a formalisation of the situation that I was in anyway. Where I could be with people and be in a world of my own anyway (Joanne).

Mick and Simon provide further examples of the divergent ways that living alone is perceived to be a continuation of childhood circumstances:

My life is one of a whole heap of unusual circumstances. I certainly know that [laughs]. You know the death of parents early on is one thing, and the fact that I’ve never shed a tear about this. I’m just not that kind. I just don’t work that way. I mean, I certainly know of many people who rue a solitarily lifestyle, or if they haven’t got a partner at any given time, are complete wrecks. But I don’t feel upset about that… That’s just the way I’ve always been I suppose. Staunchly independent (Mick).

With me, it is like same job same location for seventeen years, and I think [that is] because I didn’t like change. I had a lot of change when I was a kid, so you hang on to something that doesn’t have to change if you don’t want to… Like my sister’s not married and it sort of comes back to our childhood as well, it’s that, you know, my folks, well my mum particularly, not my folks because I’ve had five dads, but you know you go through five marriages, and you’re going from nation to nation … you just sort of, marriage for me was never the so called holy grail. It’s not the holy grail that you achieve, it’s not something you go...
‘Okay in my life this is what I want to achieve’ … I think the real thing is that I hate change. I really hate change and I think because you dealt with so much change in your life, you go from different schools to different nations to different fathers and you go ‘I think I’ve done my lot’. I remember counting. I think we counted out that we did over thirty-eight shifts (Simon).

Participants thus offer ‘legitimate’ reasons for not complying with cohabiting norms by structuring narratives to emphasise influences or incidents from childhood which are understood to have shaped their personality, and in turn, played a role in living alone. Demographers Goldcheider and Waite (1991) argue that because children do their most fundamental learning within the home, people who have experienced parental divorce are less likely to develop families of their own. People whose parents have divorced, they argue, are likely to avoid marriage and are not likely to take the risk of cohabitating (Goldcheider and Waite, 1991: 21). Furthermore, Hugh Mackay’s (1993) work indicates that much of the age cohort targeted in this study are the offspring of the most divorced generation in history (Mackay, 1993: 63). It could be anticipated, therefore, and indeed has been, that there is a causal link between the high divorce rate of the 1970s and 80s and increased numbers of one-person households. However, less than half of the participants come from ‘broken homes’, and as I have pointed out in the preceding section, while the divorce of parents is one factor, participants link solo living to almost every family configuration imaginable. This suggests that respondents substantiate their desires to control change, avoid friction, be independent, be different, or have things their own way, by connecting living alone to their childhood circumstance. While this reveals the strength of popular discourse regarding the impact of childhood on adult life, it also implies a need to defend the circumstances of their solo living. By attributing some of the responsibility to their parents or ‘forces’ beyond their control, they deflect the blame associated with choice. This defensive element also
reveals a further, and particularly evident, point of tension between the discourses of popular individualistic consumer culture promoting personal choice, instant gratification and ‘having it all’ (one’s own way), and the entrenched, influential and simultaneous discourses of self-sacrifice, mutual commitment, and compromise, upon which the institution of marriage and family, and ultimately, national identities are built.

Moralism, Childlessness and Nationalism

During the first decade of the twenty-first century, debate in Australia about the birth rate and childlessness escalated within the public arena. In a newspaper article published in 2005, Australian Liberal Member of Parliament, Malcolm Turnbull predicted that the ‘problem’ of the ageing population will create tension between a shrinking tax base and a dependant aged population, and proposed that countries with strong welfare bases will be far less successful in surviving this tension than countries with smaller welfare bases and a “strong culture of self-reliance”. He went on to warn about the “folly of neglecting issues of family formation, marriage and fertility” by arguing that the high birth rates in “Muslim countries” compared to the below replacement level birth rate in Australia and other western nations, present a “threat to social order” (Turnbull, 2005: 11). In an effort to further this same agenda, former Treasurer Peter Costello subsequently recommended larger families by famously urging Australians in 2006 to have “One child for Mum, one for Dad, and one for the country” (Costello and Coleman, 2009). Marilyn Anderson (2007) has contextualised Turnbull and Costello’s recommendations in her discussion of the way both the former and the present Australian federal governments have responded to the projected negative economic outcomes of an ageing population,
with pronatalist and family-friendly rhetoric, policies, and tax incentives, which she argues, have subjected Australian women to a renewed pressure to procreate (Anderson, 2008: 40). The connections that Turnbull drew between the benefits of weak welfare systems and strong cultures of self reliance, with the ‘problems’ of the ageing population, the low birth rate in Australia, and the high birth rates in ‘Muslim countries’, demonstrate Turnbull’s agenda to not only scare prospective parents into procreation, but to present neoliberal economic reform and childbearing as the remedy for the ‘problems’ presented by both the ageing population and by ‘Muslim’ immigration. The pressure to procreate is understandably, therefore, a distinctive theme in the narratives of respondents and although it is more clearly articulated by women, it is also a concern to men. Rick’s response to my question about whether or not he finds living alone isolating, characterises the impact of the pronatalist political rhetoric on both male and female participants:

I suppose there are times sort of watching the news and you hear about all these initiatives for young couples, first home buyers, this, that and the other. I sort of think, well I suppose what I’m trying to say is, the short answer is yes, sometimes I do feel isolated because as a society we’re geared towards, people grow up, they get married and have children and society carries on sort of thing. And I don’t think society is geared up for people who just want to, either by choice or by circumstances, be alone. Because it’s like ‘Well what’s your contribution to society?’ You think, ‘Well, I go out and work’. It’s family. Yeah, two kids, dog, yard, acre block. Or it’s two and half kids, I don’t know. I’m not sure what you can really do about it... So sometimes I do feel isolation but what can you do about it? You just move on (Rick).

In Chapter Four I drew attention to participants’ experiences of the stigma embedded in the current political rhetoric and social and economic policies providing for ‘working families’ while ignoring, and thus implicitly disapproving of, and disadvantaging, the solo living demographic. As Rick points out, the pronatalist discourse constructs children as ‘contributions to society’ and implicitly
questions the worth of childless individuals. In various ways, therefore, both female and male participants frame their childlessness as a problem. Smith, Wasoff and Jamieson’s (2005) analysis of the United Kingdom’s General Household Survey does not explore the issue of childlessness for solo living men in the UK but reveals that forty-seven percent of women aged between thirty and thirty-nine who live alone in the UK expect to remain childless. This figure compares with twelve percent of women the same age who live with others (Smith et al., 2005: 3), and brings attention to the fact that just over half of solo living British women expect to become parents.

Within this study, of the female participants who do not have children, some are clear about not wanting to, and some are unsure about whether they would like to become mothers in the future. Some female respondents are physically unable to have children, and others would like to but feel that decision is contingent upon finding a suitable cohabiting partner. Leslie Cannold’s (2005) What No Baby? explores the often circumstantial nature of childlessness in contemporary Australia. She argues that cultural ideals pertaining to independence, career, education, financial security, and idealised notions of perfect partners have left many women childless in their thirties and forties when they neither expected nor desire to be so. Cannold argues that in the past it was expected that all “normal” women would have, and would want to have children. To be infertile was to be pitied and to chose childlessness was simply deviant. Motherhood was thus the approved site upon which Australian women structured identity and women’s acquiescence was fundamental to the “Australian way” (Cannold, 2005: 108). Cannold proposes that today’s “thwarted mothers”, or those who want children but have not been able to
realise their goal, tend to attract the greatest amount of public interest near the end stages of their reproductive lives. She argues that women in this position often feel “a profound sense of being socially exposed as unloved, and unlovable”, and are likely to pair off with a less than suitable partner or begin seeking to conceive through the process of invitro-fertilisation (Cannold, 2005: 62).

Cannold’s findings that women desiring to become mothers are in the later stages of reproductive life are reflected in Anais and Tracey’s stories. Both in their mid-thirties and geographically mobile for career purposes, Anais and Tracey want to have children and are looking for partners to facilitate this aspiration. I mentioned in Chapter Three that Anais is planning on having a child irrespective of whether she meets an appropriate partner. She explains that she is preparing herself and her mother for the possibility that she may not find a partner and could therefore choose to go ahead with childbearing independently:

To me family is really important, so I’d love to have a family. So that’s why I don’t see myself, you know, in the long term, living alone (Anais).

You want to have kids? (Ruthie)  
Yeah, so I’ve got to find a partner, and if not, I’ll do it by myself.

Like IVF, do you mean? (Ruthie)  
Yeah well it’s a definite option. My mother has come around to the idea of that now, so that’s okay [laughs] (Anais).

Unlike Anais, Tracey ‘worries’ that her decision to have children is dependent upon finding a partner:

It does scare me being thirty-five and wanting a family and knowing that there’s, you know, the [biological] clock’s ticking sort of thing. So that does get me down occasionally. So sometimes more than others... Yeah I’m really worried about not meeting anyone and not having that part of my life fulfilled (Tracey).

At the other end of the spectrum, Jessie and Adele neither want nor like children:
I don’t know when the realisation came about from the assumption I would [have children] to the ‘I’m definitely not’. But yeah, I don’t even like other people’s babies. No, I actively don’t like children. I don’t think pictures of them are cute or anything. One woman I used to work with at one of my other jobs, she gave out her baby photos to everybody else and her cat photos to me [laughs]. I don’t like kids I think they’re horrid. Annoying. I find nothing appealing in them (Jessie).

I can’t bear children. They make me very anxious. I’ve never wanted to bring one forth. I appreciate for others they would look at me with great pity and sadness, but for me it’s fabulous. I can’t believe my luck (Adele).

In Chapter Six I demonstrated that Jessie and Adele both revel in their eccentricity and unapologetically contravene social norms. Their characteristically bold claims about childlessness strike a contrast with many other women’s stories. Lola and Jen’s stories about not aspiring to have children, for example, suggest an influence of the discourse in which the low birth rate is attributed to ‘selfish career women’, and both Lola and Jen express the idea that not wanting to have children is ‘selfish’ or ‘horrible’. Lola feels she ‘should apologise’ for not wanting to have children and defends her position by asserting she was ‘made that way’:

Everyone assumes you haven’t had kids but you want them. Because you’re a female of course you want kids. I have never ever yearned to be a mother. I thought I should apologise because I probably could have or probably still can have kids, where there are other people who want to and can’t. I have just never wanted to. Children just don’t entice me. I love them to bits as long as they’re not mine. The whole thought of, and I’ve said it, the whole idea of dropping the kids off to school, picking them up, taking them to soccer or to piano, that whole thing just, I can’t even imagine it. And it’s ‘God you’re selfish’. It’s like ‘Well I suppose I am’. I guess I am but I’ve thought that from when I was still at school so I don’t think it’s because I’ve grown to be like this. It’s just the way I’ve been made (Lola).

Similarly, Jen justifies her position by recounting that she did not want children from an early age and that this was not a ‘conscious decision’ but that she simply ‘wasn’t cut out to be a mother’. Jen also draws upon discourse of an overpopulated planet:
I knew I was not ever going to have children. It was not even a decision I made. It’s just I’m not particularly fond of them. A horrible thing to admit, but. So I think in a lot of ways I think I’m really lucky I’m not pulled in any direction by anybody else. If I don’t want to do anything I don’t have to do it.

So you’re not fond of kids? (Ruthie)

It’s their reliance on you. I don’t know, I was just never fond of children and I just always knew that I would never have any. I would tell people at fourteen I was never going to have kids, and I would tell people at twenty that I was never going to have kids, and finally when I guess I got to forty maybe they started to believe me. As I say, it was not a conscious decision it was just something I always knew. I wasn’t cut out to be a mother. I would have made a terrible mother. I think there are probably plenty of children in the world anyway without me bringing [more] (Jen).

In Chapter Three I argued that the discourse of individual psychology exists in tension with the cultural imperative to desire and achieve romantic partnership, and demonstrated that participants often utilise this tension to legitimate their lack of couple-normativity. Here, Lola and Jen demonstrate that this tension can also be employed to avert blame associated with childlessness. The discourse of individual psychology allows Lola to discuss the fact that she finds the idea of children depending upon her unappealing, and Jen to raise the indifference she feels towards children because of children’s ‘reliance’, without presenting as unacceptably deviant. In detailing their rationale for not having children, these women reinforce popular child-centred discourse wherein children should be wanted, mothered and loved by somebody who puts her children’s needs first. Drawing on this, Lola and Jen present themselves as being unsuitable mothers, and in this way, childlessness becomes justifiable, or even a good thing.

Concerns about children’s dependence raised by female participants such as Lola and Jen are a variation on a theme also evident in the stories of those male participants who express concern about the responsibility of parenthood. Illustrating
this difference, Rick describes his childlessness, and his desire to remain so, by prioritising career:

I don’t want to go into a ready made family, or I suppose I don’t want to take on other people’s responsibilities and children and stuff like that. One reason why [my ex-wife and I] didn’t have kids is that we’re very career oriented. She had her own business and children just weren’t part of the equation. And also I was getting to an age where I really don’t want that responsibility of having kids and all that sort of stuff (Rick)

In Chapter Five I pointed out that male participants are likely to place their professions at the top of their priority scales because unlike the female participants, they are not subject to negative stereotyping if they have successful careers. In the same vein, only male participants draw on career to explain their childlessness. However, as I have demonstrated above, although male participants are not required to negotiate an equivalent of the ‘selfish career woman’ stereotype, as Rick does, they can feel that their childlessness raises questions about their worth to society, as well as providing an indication of an unsuccessful ascension to the correct ‘life stage’.

**Life Stage Discourse**

Barbara Ehrenreich (1983) argues that within the schema of male pathology developed by mid-twentieth century psychologists, adult masculinity was indistinguishable from the breadwinner role. Therefore, a man who failed to achieve the breadwinner role was either not fully adult or not completely masculine. Ehrenreich cites sociologist Manfred Kuhn who in 1955 reported on the reasons for people’s failure to marry which included homosexuality, an emotional fixation on parents, and an unwillingness to assume responsibility (Ehrenreich, 1983: 20). Ehrenreich also quotes psychoanalyst Dr Richard Burnett from a 1975 textbook for social workers. He recommends that in the ascent to maturity: “Sometimes there is a
prolonged stalemate between progressive and regressive forces, and …pathological outcomes are frequent… Familiar examples are those who are unable to choose a mate…” (Ehrenreich, 1983:21). Life course discourse has moved on from these rigid notions. Today, life course theorists posit that individuals choose the paths they follow, but that their choices are prescribed by the opportunities structured by social and cultural institutions (Giele and Elder, 1998: 22). Even so, popular notions about immaturity stemming from the life stage discourse of the mid-twentieth century constitute a popular discourse which is markedly evident in respondents’ narratives.

In Chapter Three I used a quotation from Dave’s interview which detailed a recent ‘crisis’ in his life. Dave explained that he suddenly realised that all his friends were ‘married or otherwise with children’, which left him feeling ‘like a big kid’ and in a state of distress. Dave’s story suggests that his crisis was informed by his understanding that he had not matured to the appropriate life stage. Dave further explains that taking on responsibilities is a strong element of his desire to have children:

I would like to have kids. You have to find some sort of meaning in life. It’s literally a meaning of life question. If I’m living alone now, do I always want to be alone? No, um, why? Because I’ve always wanted to be in some kind of relationship, but for one reason or another it hasn’t happened. If it’s going to end up that I’m always going to be alone, then I have to make some kind of sense out of that. So what do you see your purpose in life is? Is it just to work? You know, I think not... Either, or, you have to make it through a commitment to other people and, you know, leaving an impression on people that you leave behind, or you want to be a Fred Hollows or a somebody who’s doing something, you know, a social consciousness, yeah. I don’t know how much it’s built into us that we want to leave our genes behind, but I think it’s kind of transcended that a bit. Either we leave offspring behind and we grow them up well, or we want to leave something worthwhile behind but who knows which is better? (Dave).
The similarities and differences between Rick’s refusal and Dave’s drive to take on the responsibilities of parenthood, and Lola and Jen’s disinclination to have dependents relying upon them, could point again to the impact of shifting gender norms on participants’ ideas about family and identity norms. The term ‘responsibility’, when used in the context of having children, evokes agency and a powerful position of control, whereas the ‘reliance’ that Jen and Lola refer to, suggests being stifled and overpowered. The rejection of the subjugation traditionally associated with caring and motherhood, or as in Rick’s case, the rejection of the responsibility of fatherhood, both emphasise the gendered norms around childrearing which render men active and responsible and women passive and reliable, and illustrate a tendency in some participants to seek emancipation from these expectations.

**Stigma and Childlessness**

Seeking liberation from, or union with, familial norms is important to participants because of the stigma associated with breaking them. In Chapter Four I discussed Denise Riley’s (2002) proposition that to be without cohabiting family is to be positioned low on a social hierarchy, and I have demonstrated with Sara and Julia’s stories that childlessness is a distinct theme in participants’ descriptions of, and defences against, the stigmatising they encounter. I also raised Yang and associates’ proposition that stigma is felt most powerfully in the inter-subjective space between

---

9 It is interesting to note that although a few participants have already lost their parents to old age, perhaps because of the age range of the sample, the majority are yet to face the reliance of, and responsibilities for, ageing and infirm parents, and it is therefore not possible to speculate on whether the rejection of the traditional roles of parenthood demonstrated above, is also reflected in relationships with older parents.
people’s families and social networks (Yang et al., 2007: 1532). The family, therefore, as Luke illustrates, is often an especially potent site of stigma:

I’ve kind of encountered [stigma] from my various female relatives. You know it’s ‘What is wrong with you? Why haven’t you settled down with some nice girl?’ You know, ‘Where are the grandkids? Damn you’ [laughs]...You end up feeling a sense of personal failure. You know, that you’re inadequate in some way... It’s only in the family group and maybe I select the sorts of friends who don’t make those kinds of judgments of me. So yeah it’s only in the family group (Luke).

Earlier I mentioned that Grace links her solo living to the influence of her mother who strongly encouraged her to be financially independent. Grace further explains that while her mother on the one hand approves of Grace’s ongoing independence, she also applies a subtle pressure for Grace to conform to coupled norms:

I mentioned the influence of my mum. It’s very strong. Strong sort of feminist. She’s a feisty, strong, outspoken woman who kind of fulfilled that real mum role [laughs]. But also was really kind of ‘Don’t ever be reliant on a man for money’. You know, kind of [laughs] put me off men probably [laughs]. So she, without knowing it, probably influenced me [living alone] more than she realises.... By the same token, she’s like ‘Well, why don’t you [find someone]? What’s so and so doing now?’ And it’s like ‘Oh god, I can see what you’re trying to do Mum’ [laughs]. But she also probably, she said something the other day like ‘Oh well Jane’s daughter (who’s my age), you know, she said to her mum “Well you know Mum, I probably never will have kids and that’s cool. You know, I’ve got all these kids around me so that’s okay”. So mum retold me that story and I kind of thought, ‘Is she telling me this to let me know it’s okay if I’m in that situation too?’ (Grace).

Luke and Grace’s stories demonstrate that as Yang et al., (2007) propose, stigma is especially poignant when expressed within the implicit communications between families or other important connections. The pressure or concerns expressed by members of participants’ families about them living alone are invariably focused around non-compliance with coupled and familial norms. Because no such pressure or concerns are likely to be put upon widows or widowers who, as I argued in Chapter Four, are ‘allowed’ to live alone, the concerns of respondents’ families about solo living can be understood as being informed by life stage discourse.
Recuperation

Grace recuperates from accusations of deviance by questioning the innate human desire to procreate, and drawing upon her ability to ‘tick the boxes’ of other socially approved ideals, such as her dual home ownership which I mentioned in Chapter Five, and the importance of her relationship with the children in her family:

I think ‘Well, I’m still incredibly lucky that I’ve got five nieces and nephews who think I’m that ants pants’. You know, like I kind of go, ‘That’s pretty cool’, you know. If I can forge a relationship with these young things who are twenty-five percent of my DNA, I kind of go, I’ve still got a family, a family influence. You know that thing about, you know, I have to have a child to recreate me, or whatever it is. I don’t know what some people [think], what the mindset is, but I know that’s not what everyone thinks. But I’m sort of, look, I’m still ticking some pretty good boxes here of what, you know, what I’ve got around me. And I actually love, I work with kids. I have an amazing affinity with kids. I click with them, um, so it is a bit like that little story of my mum’s. My mum was saying about her friend’s daughter, you know, it is knowing that you’ve kind of got them around you and you love them and they love you. That’s pretty nice (Grace).

Grace implies that as an aunt, and as someone who sometimes works with children, she is in a relatively privileged position. By enjoying her ‘amazing affinity with kids’, and the love they bestow upon her, while also achieving the independent financial advancement she values, Grace positions herself as being able to experience the best of both worlds. Anais and Claude further demonstrate this method of recuperation:

I catch up with my sister and nephews probably every two to three weeks. I take them and kick the football around with them, but it’s nice to be able to hand them back [laughs] (Claude).

I’ve got six nieces and nephews, they’re all in Perth but I get there as often as I can …and they love you to come and stay and, you know, play cricket or do whatever. It’s good and they’re good kids… I know when I go to visit my sisters you know, the kids, if someone’s staying there, well they want to go see the person staying there, they don’t want to go and see Mum and Dad (Anais).
As Grace does, Claude and Anais draw on the advantages of being a significant adult who is not a parent, in children’s lives. The ability to ‘hand them back’, and being the ‘ants pants’ or the focus of nieces and nephews affections, effectively draws attention to, and moderates, the stigma of being childless.

Five of the forty-one participants are parents, including two mothers, Bella and Ivy, and three fathers, Rourke, Rex and Brett. Bella and Ivy both suggest that their motherhood enables them to experience and appreciate living alone as a ‘life stage’ following childrearing which allows for self-reflection and personal enrichment:

I think as women we’re conditioned to think that we’ve got to be at the top of the Eiffel Tower with, you know, Prince Charming. Two long-term relationships down and a grown up daughter, I suppose I don’t worry too much. I don’t have a lot of investment in like ‘I’ll be alone for the rest of my life’… I think getting to the other side of raising a child, the other side of relationships, and being in your forties also gives you time to reflect and it also frees you up there. And it probably also gives you time to relax a bit on some of the more day to day things and just thinking about yourself and taking it a bit more easy (Bella).

I can’t now imagine living with other people and I suspect, in my own self-analysis that, that has to do with perhaps having short-circuited the growing up process. You know, that whole business of becoming an independent adult where you get used to living in your own skin and you differentiate yourself from your family of origin and its environment and your socialisation in it, before you then move into a different family, a family of your own choosing, and get married, on the strength of having developed a reasonable level of self-awareness. So I guess, I don’t like to say that I’m living my life backwards, but I guess I see that what I’m doing now is something my kids are doing in their twenties. I was married by the time I was twenty and had children by the time I was twenty-four. So there’s a life stage I suppose that I’m doing now. The beauty of it, I think, is that you do it on the back of a whole lot of life experience. So there’s a lot more to integrate and a lot more evidence that you have that contributes to your own sense of self-awareness and capacity to reflect. So other life stages have happened that inform the value, I suppose, of what I’m doing now. So I actually find it a very pleasant thing, and something that I can come and go from people, and I actually like the being in a position where you can appreciate the value of other people’s input into your life, rather than being in a position where you’re permanently surrounded by others and perhaps not having that distance… I suppose the other value of being
this age when you first experience living on your own, is that …you’re perhaps seeking after social approval less (Ivy).

In her early-fifties, Ivy observes that her ‘age’ and her ‘life stage’ allow her to feel she is ‘seeking after social approval less’ than she might have done when younger, and thus she enjoys and appreciates living alone. While this is also true of Bella who asserts that her two long-term relationships and a grown up daughter allow her to worry less about being alone for the rest of her life, she does not share Ivy’s complete contentment with living alone. In contrast to Ivy who, as I demonstrated in Chapter Four, does not feel adversely effected by stigma associated with solo living, Bella, Rex and Brett each describe their experience being tempered by the stigma they encounter. In Chapter Four I drew attention to Rourke’s comment that he had ‘not been exposed to [stigma] in any way, shape, or form. Or felt it in any way, shape or form’. Rourke’s imperviousness to the stigma associated with living alone is, as I have shown, not typical of the vast majority of participants, but something he has in common with Ivy. Rourke and Ivy share with others, middle-class social environments, post-graduate education, and economically rewarding high-status professions, however it appears to be a combination of these advantages with previous long-term (over twenty year) marriages and being parents which place them in a unique position of feeling immune from stigma. This could be because they have each ‘proved’ that they are both marriageable and have nurturing, parental capacity, and can therefore not be accused of having never ‘matured’. Both the ambivalence about living alone and the strategies deployed to negate stigma characteristic of other participants, are notably absent from Rourke and Ivy’s narratives. The difference between Ivy and Rourke and the other participants reveals the implicit requirement to not only ‘achieve’ the predetermined life stages, but to achieve them at a certain ‘successful’ standard.
Summary

In this chapter I have demonstrated that life stage discourse has particular resonance in participants’ experiences of the private realm. Popular notions of life stage discourse are a substantial theme running throughout the narratives, and participants connect life stages to the pleasure, discontent, or stigma they experience while living alone. Some participants describe anxiety about being at a different, less ‘mature’, life stage from their friends, and others feel that being at different life stages has caused estrangement from their former social groups. Many respondents suggest that their families pressure them about living alone because of their life stage, and some of the participants who are parents assert that their life stage permits them an unproblematic solo living experience. By proffering marriage and childrearing as ‘healthy’ life stages, life stage discourse contributes to the fetishisation of couple-normativity, and in turn, feeds into the neoliberal agenda seeking to reduce social responsibilities by emphasising the centrality and responsibilities of individual families.

In Chapter Four I drew attention to Foucault’s (1977) proposition that stigma is constituted within the structural inequalities which discriminate against those living outside of approved norms and which discourage individuals from breaking social conventions. Foucault argues that social policy which discriminates against those living outside of approved norms has in large part superseded the function of stigma between community members. Foucault’s contention provides insight into how the notable silence about the solo living demographic in the public policies and incentives aimed at working families stigmatises people who live alone. It also elucidates the impact of the pronatalist political rhetoric upon participants which
renders childlessness a patent site of the tension between the discourse of choice, which as I have shown, is the keystone of many participants’ approaches to living alone, and the idea that not to ‘achieve’ the life stages of marriage and parenthood indicates a shortfall in personal development and national patronage. Participants’ correlations between living alone and the early influences from family life therefore work to defend personal freedoms, and in so doing, negotiate the tension between individualistic and nationalistic discourse.
Chapter Eight - Connecting Outside the Friends and Family Zone

Introduction

In this chapter I explore the social connections that participants pursue beyond the inner circle of family and close friends, or the workplace. Specifically, I investigate respondents’ interactions with their neighbours and communities, their levels of virtual connectedness, and their relationships with their pets. In the first section of this chapter I discuss participants’ narratives about their interactions with, and understandings of, their neighbourhoods and communities, and argue that an individual willingness to integrate with neighbourhood and community is somewhat dependent upon social stratification and the associated capacity to ameliorate the stigma associated with living alone. In the second section, I explore the varying degrees to which participants utilise the internet as a social medium. I also illustrate respondents’ sensitivity to the stigma associated with using the internet as a device to establish connection with other people, and argue that despite stigma about making ‘virtual connections’ being an independent stigma from that associated with solo living, the merger between the two influences the way respondents utilise the internet as a social medium. In the final section I discuss participants’ relationships with their pets. Approximately half of participants live with pets and suggest that their relationships with their pets are valued, not as a substitute for human company, but in their own right. Pets provide many respondents with a home environment in which the alterity of living alone is, to some extent, neutralised. In the previous chapter I argued that within the inner circle of family and friends, participants are required to negotiate a position in relation to discourse linking solo living with the
social ‘problems’ associated with the low birth rate. In this chapter I explore the values and beliefs expressed in participants’ stories about their interactions with people outside of their working, friendship or family environments, and argue that the composite of stigmas linked to solo living is equally influential in this domain.

**Neighbours and Communities**

Only one in four of the men and women I interviewed described either having strong community or neighbourhood ties, or reserved but helpful and friendly interactions with neighbours, while the majority described having very little or no involvement with neighbours or communities. Participants who do not interact with neighbours characteristically draw upon popular discourse about the high-risk nature of the contemporary social environment to explain their unwillingness to form relationships with neighbours or other ‘strangers’. This is particularly marked amongst women as evidenced by Jasmine and Karen’s comments about how they feel about letting neighbours into their homes:

> Because it’s my space, I don’t want to be made vulnerable by anyone having access to my place and knowing that I live alone. I think some people might take advantage of that. I don’t generally let anybody in that I don’t already know. Like, even neighbours, even if I know them, I’ll just, they’ll stay at the front door and no I don’t tend to let people in (Jasmine).

> No [I'm not a neighbourly type]. No, I’ve been bitten with that. Weird, freaky neighbours that drop in all the time and drive you nuts. Don’t respect your privacy or your space or anything like that. If I see them then I’ll say hello, but I’m not ‘Hey come in and have a coffee and lets chat’, you know. God no (Karen).

Jasmine and Karen’s ideas about the risks associated with forging relationships with neighbours are different facets of a common theme. Thia and
Holly further illustrate the link made by a few female participants between neighbours, danger, and living alone:

I’ve got a terrible neighbour who unbeknown to me used to bully the old lady that lived there before me. Bullies me. He’s just quite a malicious sort of guy… You know the guy next door wouldn’t get away with half the things that he does if there was another person living in the house (Thia).

I’m in a Housing Trust area and I’ve had a lot of trouble with neighbours with threats of violence [because I live alone] (Holly).

A couple of years into this study I met a young gay man who told me that he had recently begun to live alone for the first time. He mentioned that he was surprised to find that he was experiencing his home as a place where his personal safety could be threatened by men who visited him there. While this is purely anecdotal, it could suggest that had there been a cohort of gay men in this study, links between neighbours, danger, and solo living may not have been the exclusive concern of women. Karen’s comment demonstrates the more frequent sentiment expressed by both men and women, that the risks that neighbours pose lies in the threat they present to privacy and autonomy. Claude further illustrates this point:

I don’t talk to the neighbours very much. If I see them I’ll say hello. It’d be rare. I’d have to be very, very desperate to ask any of them for help and if I needed assistance with anything, I’d usually phone Mum and Dad because they’re only about a fifteen, twenty minute drive away anyway. It’s probably because I like being independent and being able to do everything myself if I can… It probably comes back to the thing of not wanting to impose on people (Claude).

The importance Claude places on his independence from his neighbours characterises a central theme in many participants’ understandings of neighbours. Respondents reflect the dominant neoliberal discourse about the undesirability of imposing on others in their community and the appropriateness of being self-contained within self-sufficient family units. Some respondents, such as Rick and
Anais, discussed their experience of the individualistic cultural turn which they believe renders relationships with neighbours less feasible than they were in the past:

Where I live at the moment, that relationship [with neighbours] doesn’t really afford itself. Because I’m in a town house, in a bunch of townhouses [near the city] and the only time I really bump into my neighbours is probably in the morning or afternoon when we’re parking our cars and we’re right close to each other... I probably wouldn’t describe myself as a — well I’d describe myself as a friendly person — I’d be happy to have a chat and coffee. I think it’s just the environment in society these days, and where I’m living doesn’t really lend itself to that (Rick).

No [I’m not a neighbourly type]. I always thought I would have been because when we grew up we were constantly at our neighbours’ houses all the time... So I would have thought I would be neighbourly, but I probably haven’t been...It’s odd isn’t it? … So growing up [neighbours] were a really big thing, but I guess for me it’s not. My sisters in Brisbane who have families do have relationships with their neighbours. I don’t know whether it’s a thing that when you’ve got kids you need those people to rely on to help you (Anais).

Anais’ idea that having a ‘need’ for help creates community involvement, is perhaps an important insight. The neoliberal valuing of independence, and stigmatising of dependence, may encourage people to eliminate the ‘need’ for others, and as a consequence, limit neighbourhood interaction.

People who do not interact with neighbours are also unlikely to be involved in community or volunteer projects. This is most often because, as Anais demonstrates, with busy working lives, people frequently feel reluctant to take on responsibilities which might impinge upon the freedom to pursue their own agendas:

I’ve thought about [volunteering], particularly since I’ve been down here [in Adelaide]. I thought maybe I should go and volunteer but then it sort of goes out of my mind. But then I’ll have a few weeks when I’m out doing stuff on the weekends and you think ‘Well how could I possibly fit that in?’ I wouldn’t have time [laughs] (Anais).
At the other end of the spectrum, a small minority of people, such as Mick, describe active involvement in volunteer or community work:

Well yes I’m extensively involved in [my church community]. I’m a volunteer and all that sort of stuff. I mean it’s a very entertaining and good and vibrant little community... Anyway, now it’s a flourishing community and mostly because of the work that it’s actually doing which is in the community. It’s now completely committed to work with the poor and marginalised people of the inner city (Mick).

People who describe active involvement with their communities tend, like Mick and Adele, to be those who have chosen to live alone and are socially successful in some way. Adele describes an interactive connection with people in her immediate neighbourhood:

I am a very neighbourly kind of type...one of the old neighbours used to be a very good mate ... she’s left, had to sell the house...so I still see her... I’ve been in every house [in my street]. I knocked on every door when I moved in...and made myself known. So in that way, sort of everyone knows me. But also there’s a lot of people in the street who live alone interestingly enough. So right next door to me there’s a couple who’ve just moved in recently. So they’re very nice, but then there’s some young people who we don’t talk to very much, but then there’s a guy who...invites us over for tea, the people in the street, you know, maybe once a year. So we socialise with him. Then next to him is another woman who lives alone...Then next to her is a guy, he lives alone, so we chat to him every now and again, and then next to him is a woman, and she lives alone...Yeah we’re all very friendly and we all watch out for each other. Then because we’ve got that park across the road, every Christmas we have a barbeque and we invite everybody. We all have each other’s phone numbers so we can ring each other if we’re frightened or worried because most of us are alone. Then behind me is [my good friend] and I know him and then on the other angle, I don’t know them (Adele).

Creating a marked contrast with Mick and Adele’s experience of neighbourhood and community in many ways is Holly’s experience. Holly endures considerable social disadvantage and is not living alone by choice, but as Adele does, she also lives in a neighbourhood where many people live alone:
[I don’t want my] boundaries invaded, because that happens quite a lot, especially living where I am amongst a lot of people with drug and alcohol problems, yeah, and ex cons and stuff. Yeah, so to be able to close that door and it’s like a little sanctuary. Even though there might be danger next door, you’re in your own little place and it’s sort of like you can rebuild yourself if you’ve got your own place… And I’m surrounded by people who have either given up on life, or have been given up on, and they’re content just to drink and do drugs and watch telly, pretty much. And that scares me and I was afraid of becoming like them, which is an irrational fear. So the loneliness, I think on my own too much… I just wouldn’t like to bring someone into that situation. If I was to move and have more money then I definitely would start sharing. I’d have to anyway, but even if I was in a Housing Trust place in a safer environment then I would get somebody in (Holly).

Adele and Holly’s contrasting experiences point to the power of environment to shape the experience of living alone. As a homeowner in an affluent inner-city area, Adele has forged a sense of community with others who live alone. Her neighbourhood may provide an atmosphere where living alone is the norm and the ability to feel she is living within the norm may contribute to her delight in living alone, her intention to continue doing so, and her sense of social connection. However, living alone is also the norm in Holly’s outer suburban neighbourhood where she is accommodated in state housing, feels very isolated, and would like to cohabit with others in the future. The fact that living alone is common in both neighbourhoods, is experienced as securing for Adele and threatening to Holly. This suggests that geographical spaces contribute to the quality of people’s experience and assessment of living alone. The stark contrast between Holly and Adele’s experiences points to Sennett’s (2006) proposal that within the neoliberal social environment, chance opportunities for good fortune, such as the neighbourhood Adele finds herself within, are far more likely to be available to people in privileged social positions than to those of social disadvantage (Sennett, 2006: 80).
As Holly does, Brett also reports an experience of social isolation within his
neighbourhood. Brett would like to achieve a sustained sense of connection with
others but finds that difficult to establish. Holly and Brett’s experiences suggest that
conditions in their outer suburban neighbourhoods tend not to provide the social
opportunities which enable the connection that they desire:

I sometimes feel like I could do with more friends or I’d like to be in a
relationship…yeah and it’s hard because I’m in my early-forties and a
lot of my friends are all in relationships and stuff. So, it’s hard to even
find people to go out looking for people. That’s actually a real problem.
So even when I feel like going out and trying to socialise and stuff, it’s
really hard to find someone to do that with…Then obviously you’ve got
the issues where I live [quite a way out of the city] and a lot of the social
stuff happens in the city…If you go out late at nights you’ve got to catch
cabs, which cost fifty dollars and stuff. So it’s those sorts of issues as
well. Yeah because a lot of the pubs now are full of pokies and they
don’t sort of have nightclubs or social sort of things. It’s all just people
sitting there sort of pulling the handle all night (Brett).

Brett’s experience of the isolation embedded within the neoliberal version of the
suburban project renders ‘going out looking for people’ an ineffective venture and
amplifies the primacy of cohabiting relationships in his mind. Brett and Holly share
a sense of dissatisfaction with their local environments, which are coincidently in
close proximity, but their understandings of their neighbourhoods differ in
fundamental ways. Holly, who is not employed, understands her neighbours as
people with ‘wasted’ lives, and worries that the ‘danger next door’ might be
contagious. Brett, on the other hand, is employed in a full-time, long-term position
that affords him a middle income. He senses the distinct lack of ‘social sort of
things’ in the public bars of his outer suburban area limit social interaction, but he
nevertheless questions what it is that is wrong with him that is not ‘attracting
someone’.
The Neoliberal Social Environment

Sennett (2006) argues that while augmenting free enterprise, neoliberalism’s disregard for the value of long-term strategic thinking has diminished the social and created a new formula for inequality, which he suggests, is increasingly tied to isolation (Sennett, 2006: 82). Sennett’s discussion of the neoliberal rhetoric of economic reform sheds light on Brett’s sense of culpability for his social isolation. The severe contrast the rhetoric draws between dependence and independence, eliminates the middle-ground and avoids responsibility for supporting the social needs of moderately dependent community members, and by using metaphors of abjection and wasted opportunities, the culpability is diverted onto the individual (Sennett, 2006: 103). Thus, although Brett is aware that market interests, or more particularly, the pokies, subjugate social opportunities in his neighbourhood, he feels responsible and culpable for his social isolation. While Holly, conversely, drawing from the neoliberal metaphors of abjection and squandered opportunities, diverts the blame for her isolation onto her neighbours who she sees as a disadvantaged social group with whom she does not identify.

Aside from the evident social stratification, participants’ contrasting experiences of neighbourhood and community suggest a link between willingness to associate with neighbours and participate in community, and experiences of stigma. People who are actively involved in community tend to be those who have the strongest artilleries to defend against stigma, and those who are relatively isolated tend to be those who are less well fortified, suggesting that feeling stigma about solo living may discourage integration with neighbours and community life.
Chapter Eight - Connecting Outside the Friends and Family Zone

Jen’s comment about stigma illustrates the link between stigma and unwillingness to integrate into neighbourhoods and communities:

[The stigma is] probably why I haven’t got a cat you see. [My neighbours] probably do think I’m mad. But no, neighbours are no concern to me. The people that are a concern to me are my friends and most of my friends are quite long-term friends and have seen me from being single or maybe not single but being married and then being on my own having boyfriends (Jen).

Jen suggests that she circumvents the possibility of feeling stigmatised by avoiding the stereotype of mad women who live alone with cats, and paying neighbours no regard. In order to meet her social needs she instead relies upon her connections with long-term friends, who know she is ‘normal’ because they remember that she has sustained coupled relationships in the past.

Maria Markus’ (2008) work adds a further understanding of participants’ seemingly low levels of community involvement by arguing that popular discourse provides a widespread discouragement of genuine social connection. Markus suggests that while Habermas’ (1984) notion of the colonisation of the private by the public sphere provides an understanding of how systemic logic infiltrates the private realm, it also provides a model for what she sees as its opposite: the current colonisation of the public arena by private concerns. Markus asserts that the political agendas of public figures have become secondary concerns to the salacious details of their personal lives, which, in the service of the market, have seduced public attention and dominated the public forum. She argues that this seduction of the public arena has reduced meaningful dialogue between community members and obscured focus on genuine public concerns. Concurrently, the elevation of the private into central public focus has amplified idealised notions of romantic love and generated heightened expectations of securing happiness, satisfaction and personal fulfilment.
through intimate relationships within private spaces. Thus, intimate relationships and private spaces enjoy a priority and status from which all other relationships and forums recede. In this way, relationships that have traditionally been conducted on the boundaries between the private and public spheres, such as friendships and community ties, have become relatively marginalised. This, Markus argues, limits the power of the private realm to exercise influence on civil structures, rendering individuals somewhat isolated within private spaces (Markus, 2008).

**The Retail Community**

Congruent with Markus’ ideas about the current popular and predominant focus upon the private domain, a noteworthy aspect of participants’ discussions about their neighbourhoods and communities is that relative to the amount of time they apportioned to the discussion of intimate relationships, discussion about neighbours and communities was limited and took up very little of the interview time. Moreover, many participants who do not interact with neighbours and community reflect the generalised social isolation Markus describes. For example, Max, Thia and Tom meet their needs for community connection by frequenting local shopping centres:

I live a three minute, four minute walk from the local shopping centre and I set myself up with a routine that daily I get *The Advertiser* and *The Australian* and I go down the shopping centre, get those two papers, sit down at the same coffee shop every day, buy my cup of tea, and read the papers… I became friends or have got to know various staff members within the shopping centre. From shopping centre manager through to their assistance staff and cleaners, and so you sort of, loneliness can be ameliorated by putting into place the systems which stop you from that…. I’m at the shopping centre six days a week, or five days a week on average I suppose (Max).

If you walk out your house in [my] street there would be a whole lot of people who never see anyone. Like I’m part of the brigade when I’ve been ill. We go to Coles just to speak to someone for three minutes, you
know, and have had long months and months when you don’t talk to anybody (Thia).

It does get lonely. I’ve noticed it. So now I just go for a walk. Go to the shopping centre. Go for a walk, you know, just to get out of the house because I need it. I’ll go get a packet of smokes (Tom).

In the preceding section I have argued that respondents’ common perception that neighbours are a risk to personal safety, or independence and privacy, create a tendency towards non-integration into neighbourhoods and communities, as do lifestyles largely taken up by working life. Participants’ accounts of their involvement with neighbourhoods and communities suggest that for some people, the marketplace subjugates and substitutes community interaction. Neoliberal market logic encourages and enables individuals to be wholly independent consumers, and stigmatises dependence as involving weakness, laziness, and incapacity (Hansen, 2005: 5), which may reduce the incentive to develop mutually beneficial or bartering relationships with neighbours. Without the material necessity for neighbours, and because participants do not live with children, which eliminates the need to foster children’s safety within the neighbourhood by developing relationships with other parents, respondents often do not feel the ‘need’ to integrate into their neighbourhoods and communities. Pointing to Sennett’s (2006) proposal that contemporary inequality is fundamentally linked to isolation, socially advantaged and ‘successful’ people have a far greater propensity to integrate with communities and neighbourhoods. Highlighting social stratification and the unequal opportunities for favourable ‘lifestyles’ awarded to the socially advantaged, participants’ narratives suggests that feeling stigmatised about solo living comprises a significant dimension of a common unwillingness to seek integration within neighbourhoods and communities.
Internet Connections

In the following section I explore the different ways in which participants use the internet as a means of social connection. Respondents range from those who do not use the internet at all to those who spend most of their free time on it, but the vast majority describe the internet as a tool with which to communicate with existing social networks. Participants who are geographically displaced from the areas they grew up in, or think of as home, as well as those who have more or less stayed close to the home base while their social group have become geographically dispersed, invariably describe the internet as an invaluable device for keeping in touch with loved ones. Approximately one-third of the participants either use, or have used, gaming sites, chat forums, or dating sites, whereas the other two-thirds describe their internet use as strictly for keeping in touch with friends and family, or for working purposes. Many respondents discussed their ideas about sustaining virtual connections and using dating sites, and including those who have used these social mediums, participants overwhelmingly expressed the idea that the internet is not a very desirable, suitable, or safe place to meet new people.

Anna characterises the way around two-thirds of the participants make it clear that they do not interact with people they do not already know online:

I’ve got Facebook. Facebook is people that I already know, so I’m not meeting people on Facebook…but I use Facebook to maintain friendships with people in [international cities]. Friends that I already have. I think Facebook is really, really good ... So I do use Facebook quite a lot and I like the chat facility on it because you can have chats with people you know, and know quite well maybe, but you just wouldn’t ring up. It’s too intrusive. But say they’re online and you’re online and you’ve got time to do it, it’s lovely (Anna).
As well as emphatically asserting that she only interacts online with people she already knows, Anna suggests that online communication offers a level of non-intrusive connectivity. This is echoed in other respondents’ stories, such as Joel’s, who discusses a different form of less-personal connectivity:

I participate on some different blogs. On the web blogs, on political and other topics, and I also play games online as well... It’s like a sort a community of people who used to play board games and these are like historical or military games with quite complicated rules...and you might play them over a series of months and get to know the other person or the other people you’re playing against quite well, even though they maybe Americans or English or whatever. So that’s quite important for me... It’s all fairly kind of cerebral or gaming related, or sort of humour related, and furthermore, like on the blogs, people move in and out. I guess when their situation’s changed. So sometimes you get to know and like someone and you look forward to what they have to write but then they just disappear for six months for some reason. Do you find that emotionally difficult when that happens? (Ruthie).

No it’s not emotional. It’s just a fact of life really. You don’t know whether something bad has happened to them or they just don’t feel like being on the internet anymore. So it’s not emotional (Joel).

Joel spends around twenty hours a week online where he finds a sense of ‘community’ which he experiences as an important part of his everyday life.

Bauman (2003) argues that the concept of ‘networking’ is based on the premise that connecting and disconnecting are equally valid choices, and connections are both entered into and broken at will (Bauman, 2003: xii). So although Joel looks forward to the time he spends with his virtual connections, he accepts that their sudden disappearances are ‘just a fact of life’. As it would be unusual to have the same non-emotional response if ‘real life’ connections suddenly disappeared for months on end for no apparent reason, this suggests that online networking offers Joel a level of communication which is somewhat removed from the emotionality of relating in the ‘real’ world.
Julia also spends quite a bit of time online and demonstrates perhaps the least intrusive level of connectivity:

I go onto this cycling forum at the moment, which is funny and I sit there and I read all the things about cycling events or things that they [post], their recommendations, or even, they have just a general lounge thing and that’s really kind of funny because the people, you know, they’re bored at work or whatever and they come up with funny silly things and I find it, just recently when I think of it, I’ve been going in there like a bit of a voyeur and just listening to their funny conversation and things that they’re flowing into the internet atmosphere, and the replies from people. And that’s kind of keeping my mind occupied and the quirkiness of some people kind of enlivens me a little bit. So I have been spending more time there over the last couple of months. I just check and then I think ‘Oh god I’ve whiled away the hours’ (Julia).

Participating as a silent witness to other people’s online communications ‘enlivens’ Julia and provides her with a level of connectivity she is comfortable with. Franklin (2009) argues that the advent of modern communication technologies enables users to opt out of the place they are in, and concurrently, opt out of face-to-face contacts (Franklin, 2009: 344). Julia finds that connecting with others while living alone requires effort that she does not always have the motivation for and is going through a period where the internet makes it possible for her to sustain a sense of connection to others without the effort. Julia describes her online activity as a phase in a recurrent cycle of times of social activity followed by times of social isolation, and does not intend to permanently opt out of ‘real world’ contacts.

**Dating Sites**

While participants who use the virtual world as a social resource are generally at ease with blogs, forums and gaming sites, as Julia illustrates, they tend to be far less comfortable about dating sites:
I have gone onto those dating sites, but I just was reticent to do that. You know I kind of go on there and then I kind of think ‘Oh’ and lose my nerve, I think, ‘Gosh’, you know. So I have actually met some people through that but it’s a bit, I don’t know, I just don’t feel totally comfortable with it (Julia).

Tracey provides a further example of the common idea described by female participants that even though dating sites are okay for others, participating ‘just doesn’t feel right for me’:

A few of my friends said ‘Oh you’ve got to try RSVP\textsuperscript{10}', so I put a profile on. I started chatting to somebody. It was like, ‘It just doesn’t feel right for me’. It was just, like, I don’t know, it just didn’t feel right. I didn’t feel like it was a safe way to meet people. And I mean it’s not any safer than going out and talking to somebody in a bar or something, but you know, I just didn’t feel right… I know it works for some, but I just say to people, ‘For some reason it just makes me feel really uneasy’ (Tracey).

Female participants often feel uneasy about online dating despite their beliefs about the internet being an effective tool for meeting others but male participants, conversely, tend to express scepticism about the effectiveness of the internet as a tool for meeting new people. Rick’s comment illustrates that one of the elements underlying the distinction between using the internet to stay in contact with family and friends and using it to meet new people, is the common concern expressed by both men and women, that the internet provides an easy medium for deception:

For me the internet is communication with others who are far away and instead of writing letters and sticking a stamp on it, it’s just far easier to email. And for information gathering and just looking around. But certainly not looking for relationships online and all that sort of stuff… That’s something I’m not interested in. I haven’t even given it a go. It’s just, maybe I’m scared… You can always misrepresent yourself online, you can be whoever you want to be on the internet and no one will know (Rick).

While men and women express the same concerns about trust and meeting people on the internet, the uneasiness which characterises women’s discussion of internet

\textsuperscript{10} RSVP is a popular online dating site
dating is largely absent in the stories of men. Men are more likely to describe their experiences of internet dating sites as expensive, non-profitable and for some men such as Brett, a personally negative experience:

I’ve tried different dating sites on websites and stuff a couple of times, but I’ve found that they’re always trying to get money out of you. They’re quite expensive... And then I’ve found that when I’ve done that, I’ve not had a real lot of interest anyway. You know, I guess because they’ve got a lot of people to choose from, a lot of who are a lot better paid and that kind of thing, which certainly seems to make a difference, so yeah it’s not really gone well for me. I didn’t have a lot of interest so it wasn’t making me feel particularly great so I just gave it away (Brett).

Brett’s idea that men are evaluated on their financial status is a common theme in men’s stories about dating sites. As someone on a middle income, Brett did not attract much interest on dating sites, but Wal, who enjoys a very high income, while attracting a lot of interest, found it was not genuine interest:

[I’ve tried] Facebook and one of the dating sites and found that to be, not a negative experience, but a waste of time. I mean I had a female from the Philippines trying to get in contact with me and a countless number of Russian brides... I’ve had women in the first conversation basically say ‘If you’re not interested in marrying me, I’m not interested in talking to you’. And I’m thinking ‘You don’t even know who I am’. You know, ‘Are you seriously asking me to commit to marriage on a first email contact?’ Reading my profile, you know, like what? Get real! (Wal).

As well as being assessed according to financial status and marriageability, other reasons that male participants find dating sites unsuitable include the disproportionate gender ratio on dating sites where men far outnumber women, or feeling that they are not sufficiently witty or good looking enough to attract potential dates. Kevin demonstrate a further theme in men’s negative experiences with online dating:

I’ve been on dating sites and all that, and I have met some people from dating sites in person. _How did it go? (Ruthie)._ Oh it’s hilarious. It’s just bizarre. It’s people just not turning up and then, never trust a photo. To the point where one of [the women I’d
arranged to meet] answered the door in just a bathrobe, and she was trialling men [laughs]. It was bizarre. After about 30 seconds it’s like ‘Okay I’m going now’. It’s not much fun. You’ve got two types out there. They’re either looking for a casual relationship or they’re looking to get married. From what I’ve seen there’s not much middle ground. I gave it a shot (Kevin).

Men who discussed using dating sites often feel, like Kevin does, that women who use dating sites are either seeking marriage, or casual sex. In Chapter Six I argued that, informed by a combination of post-feminist and neoliberal discourse, the contemporary discourses around sexual conduct provide powerful reinforcement for the couple-normative status quo. By categorising, naming, and ranking casual sexual experiences, contemporary culture ostensibly sanctions ‘hook ups’ or ‘friends with benefits’ (or sex which occurs outside the bounds of committed partnerships), while simultaneously demarcating these relationships as ‘low’ and placing an embargo on transitions between these types of relationships and committed partnerships. Committed partnerships, and sex which occurs outside of committed partnerships, are thus constructed as entirely different and incompatible realms, with one realm essentially precluding the other. Male respondents’ experiences of online dating culture suggest that dating sites provide an arena in which these understandings are played out. As Kevin puts it, the culture of dating sites does not allow for ‘much middle ground’. This lack of ‘middle ground’ may render dating sites a difficult arena in which to establish genuine connection and may explain the male participants’ frequently described negative experience of feeling sexually, fiscally, or personally commodified when engaging with them.
The Negatives and The Positives of Social Networking

Although the negative experience male participants describe is most often linked with dating sites, Simon extends this negative sense of commodification to the social networking site Facebook:

I didn’t want to celebrate [my 40th birthday] because I was looking at a lot of people that I knew [on Facebook]. The invention of Facebook is probably horrible [laughs] in that relation, because you say ‘Oh look at me with my family and my kids’, and ‘Oh I’ve gone here and I’ve gone here’, and I go ‘Oh jeez what the hell have I done?’ If you’re comparing to that sort of stereotype because there’s not many [single people], well I know a couple of my single mates, but I’ve actually gone straight into that sort of hermit isolation attitude where they’ll work, go home, and that’s it. They don’t want people to make accusations of why are they single? or anything like that. It’s just ‘Oh you’re ugly’ or whatever. I’m not saying that people say that but, you know, you’re undateable, you’re undateable. So when I was looking at a mate that I knew from school [on Facebook], it was like all of a sudden you just don’t, you can’t get through to them…I’m being very honest here, I was, you go into that horrible spiral (Simon).

For Simon, Facebook does not offer an arena where he can connect with a social network, but instead provides him with a solitary way to compare his worldly achievements with those of people he once knew, and he feels he has not achieved an acceptable standard of living for his age and life stage. Rather than putting him in touch with others, Simon’s experience with Facebook is isolating and leaves him with the sense he is ‘undateable’ and descending in a ‘horrible spiral’. Josh, on the other hand, appears to enjoy the commodification of people and finds the experience ‘exciting’ and ‘addictive’:

I’ve participated in internet dating for quite a few years and I have met some really nice people and sometimes I think it’s easier than going out to a nightclub to meet people. Internet dating can take over quite a bit of your time. You get home, you turn on your computer, you check your messages, then you might do something, then you get back online again and start chatting to a few people and it could take up so much of your time. It can. I guess when you’re single and you haven’t got much to do, it takes up quite a bit of your time and it’s good having that interaction with people. For example, if I get home from work at four o’clock, I get on there, check my messages, there’ll be certain people on there that
I’ve made contact with, that would talk to me. You could spend all night on there. The excitement, you know, thinking ‘Who’s going to send me a wink or a kiss?’ Or, ‘Has this person responded?’ It’s really an excitement thing, and it can get quite addictive.

Addictive? In what way? (Ruthie).

Addictive, like say you’re conversing with one person then all of a sudden someone who looks a lot better looking or more appealing converses with you and you think ‘Hey I’ll try conversing with them’, and at the same time you’re trying to converse with other people and it just gets, for me personally, it gets too much. But that’s just me, whereas I know people online that can have multiple conversations and their typing speed is just unbelievable and they can [carry out multiple simultaneous online relationships] (Josh).

In the preceding section I have demonstrated that many participants use the internet to stay in touch with loved ones. Some participants describe a comfortable and ‘non-intrusive’ level of connectivity on the internet, which ranges from using chat or email facilities, to experiencing a sense of connectivity as either a spectator or a participant in online networks. Franklin (2009) found in his survey of Australian loneliness that among internet users, socialising online is associated with increased levels of loneliness (Franklin, 2009: 349), so it is perhaps significant that only a small minority of participants reported that engaging with online social forums has a negative effect on their sense of self. With one or two exceptions, and for different reasons, both female and male participants, including those who have tried it, generally feel that dating sites are not a suitable way of meeting potential partners.

In the following section, I explore the underlying cultural discourse implicit in participants’ collective lack of enthusiasm about interacting with strangers online.

**Stigma and The Internet**

Mick, who enjoys using the internet to stay in contact with his existing social network, provides insight into participant’s strong tendency to reject the possibility of making new connections with people online:
A good many of my friends have had greater or lesser experience with dating services. One of my colleagues in particular is always on RSVP.com\textsuperscript{11} or something and the litany of woe that emanate from this experience! I think sad but true reminders about the caution with which you really need to approach that kind of thing... I think to me it is a good example of what loneliness can drive some people to do. And not always is their response to their loneliness the most healthy thing, or the most satisfying thing. I haven’t sought to make relationships or connections online that are outside my frame of reality in that sense…I find [looking for connection with people online] eccentric and also it seems to me that, although I’m fully aware it’s the most prevalent means of seeking contact these days, seeking romantic contact these days - in the world probably - but it just seems to me to be so subject to abuse that you’d really have to be jolly lucky for the person with whom you’re interacting to be completely honest, open and honest, not to be embroidering the truth. Obviously once you’ve met someone in person many secrets are disclosed. But nonetheless, I think for an impressionable weak-willed character, who is terribly lonely, they would be pretty willing to suppress feelings of anxiety about a person, or you know obvious embroideries of untruths or blatant untruths for the sake of, you know, the company they seek. And essentially there is, as I mentioned with the colleague of mine, there’s one disaster after another... I have engaged in some idle speculation on whether I’m afraid of taking that risk [of connecting with people online] or if it’s simply a choice that I make. And I’ve come to the conclusion that it’s choice. I’m not afraid of, well I’m not afraid of something if I want to do it, so yeah (Mick).

The language Mick uses about ‘seeking romantic contact’ online bears the hallmarks of social stigma. He describes it as ‘disaster’ prone; something ‘lonely’ people do; not the most ‘healthy thing’ for ‘weak willed characters’, and ‘eccentric’.

Shannon’s refusal to try connecting with others online also highlights the stigma around meeting people on the internet:

I’m not in the cyber-world. I don’t even have Facebook. So nothing like that at all. Just email. It’s something I find, I don’t know if scary is the word, it’s um, to me I feel like if I went on and did cyber-world I’d feel like there is some loneliness. I’d feel like I was living a fake life, searching out (Shannon).

Shannon’s feeling that if she made online connections she would be surrendering to loneliness, mirrors Mick’s idea that using the internet to connect with others is for

\textsuperscript{11} RSVP is a popular online dating site.
those who are lonely. I return to the issue of loneliness in Chapter Nine where I argue that, because of their living arrangements, participants are required to negotiate culturally loaded and stigmatised notions of loneliness.

Shannon’s feeling that ‘searching out’ on the internet would constitute a ‘fake life’ points to popular discourse idealising notions of synchronistic or chance romantic encounters as the conduit of the ‘real’ and ‘good life’. Grace’s articulates this understanding about ‘real life’ in her simultaneous interest and discomfort about virtual connections:

[The internet has] never appealed to me, and having said that, it could probably be a very good, positive tool to embrace if I needed to but I’ve never felt the need. A friend was just saying - I was out with him the other night, and he was talking about that he sort of went on an internet dating thing, and I said ‘Really? Tell me about it. What did you do?’ I was kind of fascinated [laughs], and I said ‘Why don’t you just join a tennis club? [laughs]. So yeah I have no, a little part of it, it’s only because I’ve not explored it, it makes me kind of a bit uncomfortable with it. But having said that, the dating stuff aside, I know there’s great chat rooms where you’re talking about dogs and stuff, you know, but once again I think, ‘Well I’ve got enough people that I can talk to so I don’t need that’. But I appreciate that it’s an amazing, a potentially amazing tool, but also I think it can be, people who are kind of, it could prevent certain people from actually stepping outside and joining the tennis club. But if that’s their only contact, then that’s better than nothing (Grace).

Although Grace believes online networks are a ‘potentially amazing tool’ which she is ‘fascinated’ by, she feels that they are only appropriate as a last resort for those who have no other social contact. Her questioning of her friend about why he does not join a tennis club instead of trying internet dating, positions chance encounters as superior to online connections. Holly makes a similar point:

You know what? I always made fun of people who do [make virtual connections] [laughs]. But I have come across a few sites...but to me it’s not the same. I’m very much a face-to-face person, but you know, it is some help. They’ve got some support sites...and I’ve sort of got this thing going from Manchester where I’m from. I’ve always been
interested in community development...I’d like to get a pen pal from Manchester. You make me think that I’ve actually got more going on than I thought (Holly).

Grace and Holly’s stories suggest that they would like to be open to the possibility of connecting online, but feel that the risk of falling short of the ideal, and thus feeling stigmatised, is too high.

A further element of the stigma associated with online communication in people’s stories is demonstrated in Adele’s response:

That internet thing? Only for like emailing at work. Any funny business like...well [a colleague] was telling me...she was hearing that everyone was doing it so much. They can go online and tug their old fella on a camera while someone’s watching with great interest. I don’t care for it. I’m not interested in Facebook or meeting people over the internet. Can’t think of anything more tedious... I couldn’t even imagine having to turn on a computer and connect with people and look at their pink bits. I like to go home and have some tea and watch Australian Idol (Adele).

Perhaps because proportionally, pornography occupies far more cyberspace than most other online sectors (Morozov, 2011), the internet can be cast, as it is by Adele, in a somewhat sordid light. As I have argued in Chapter Six, participant’s general unwillingness to challenge sexual norms suggests that sexuality is one of the central bastions of neoliberal power, and sexuality is fundamental to the stigma associated with solo living. Respondents are required to navigate a minefield of stigmas, and freely choosing to take on yet another, in the form of interacting with strangers online, may be more than most participants are willing to accommodate. Alternatively, because of the stigma involved, participants may not have revealed the full extent of their online activity during our interviews. Pam’s capitulation from describing meeting others online as ‘creepy’, to ‘perfectly fine’ and ‘just the way people meet nowadays’ suggests that her initial, or emotional, response to my
question, belies her actual experience and her more considered thoughts on the
issue:

In terms of keeping up with family and friends [the internet is] very
important, but as a sort of ‘I want to go online and I want to go into a
chat room and I want to meet [someone]’ and that sort of thing, not so
much. It’s boring and creepy. Just not for me.

_Just not your cup of tea? (Ruthie)._ 
It’s not that it’s not my cup of tea. I do enjoy the emails and chatting to
my friends and things I just don’t, or maybe I just haven’t had any luck
in meeting anybody interesting to socialise with.

_Have you ever met anyone in person from online? (Ruthie)._ 
Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, but that was, I met them but then they ended up
knowing someone I knew. So that way. So that was about it. It’s not
that it’s not my thing, if it’s someone who you know through friends,
like you know them through a Facebook connection or something like
that. That’s just a little bit of a different connection. I know you can start
chatting a little bit more easily, but, or maybe I just don’t know the right
places to go. Well I probably just haven’t had the luck because I don’t
have a problem at all with the whole internet dating sites and things like
that, they’re fine. I’ll put my picture up and put my profile up. I put a
profile up once but nothing came of it so I guess I just didn’t try again.
But no, it’s perfectly fine, and like, in our era, like you went to the
disco, but our parents would have been in very different circumstances,
and it’s just the way people meet nowadays (Pam).

Pam suggests that to make online connections with people who share a mutual
friend is more acceptable than meeting strangers. Presumably, if there is a mutual
friend, the risk of presenting as lonely, or as resorting to desperate measures by
taking potluck with total strangers, is considerably lessened. At the same time,
sharing a mutual connection reinstates an element of fate into the relationship,
which restores the romantic ideal.

Participants’ ideas about internet use highlight the convergence of cultural discourse
around virtual connections. The risks of ‘stranger danger’; idealised and widely
celebrated notions of fate and coincidental romantic encounters; the
commodification and consumption of romance, people, sex, and relationships, and
taboos around loneliness and sexuality, stigmatise the experience of connecting with
strangers online. Stigma associated with interacting with strangers online appears to be far more of a concern for female participants than it is for males. This disparity may be partly explained by Flood’s (2005) findings that women tend to use the computer to communicate while men tend to play games (Flood: 2005: 36). However, in Chapter Six I demonstrated that men discussed their consumption of virtual sex quite openly, and argued that cultural taboo may prevent women from either consuming, or discussing their consumption of virtual sex, and it may be that a similar dynamic is at play here. In Chapter Nine I demonstrate that some female participants worry that the independence of solo living breaks the conventions of heteronormativity and therefore diminishes the likelihood of establishing a long-term partnership. Thus, when cast as a medium for sexuality which occurs outside, and therefore thwarts, the conventions of heteronormativity, online forums, or more particularly, dating sites, can be perceived as a potential threat. It is possible therefore, that women are more sensitive to, and concerned about, stigma about meeting others online, because historically, while it has been imagined as a man’s ‘nature’ to do so, women have been held accountable for disruptions to the heteronormative status quo. Nevertheless, connecting online, either with virtual or real life networks, provides most participants with welcome levels of connectivity.

**Living Alone With Pets**

In the remainder of this chapter I explore the experience of living alone with pets. Approximately half the respondents own pets which are central to their lives and domestic environments and are frequently referred to as family, companions or best friends. Pet owning participants most often believe that their experience of solo living is improved by their relationships with their pets because pets allow for
cohabitation with significant others while also living alone. Participants with pets’ stories bring attention to changing understandings about, and forms of, intimacy, and suggest that relationships with pets are often valued ipso facto, precisely because of their non-human qualities.

**Turning Empty Houses into Homes**

Pet owning participant stories’ suggest that by eliminating the aloneness from living alone, pets can be instrumental in creating a space to navigate personal and social understandings of solo living in non-threatening ways. For example, Anna illustrates that pets’ perceived non-judgementality can allow respondents to contravene established norms without seeming ‘weird’:

> I talk to [my two cats] of course. I don’t talk to them about anything, I just sort of chat away to them and I think if I didn’t have cats, I could probably not do that running conversation because I’d be weird and talking to the wall or something. But I quite enjoy that sort of like, ‘How are you feeling?’ and stuff, that’s quite nice… I don’t know, I think they make living alone a bit more normal because you don’t come home to an empty echoing house (Anna).

Anna feels that her cats’ presence in her home makes living alone ‘more normal’ because talking to her cats is more acceptable than talking to the walls, and because she is not the only inhabitant in her home. Anna expresses the common belief that pets turn empty houses into homes, which, as further illustrated by Karen, Lola, Tracey, Sarah and Rourke, constitutes the key theme in participants’ stories about living with pets:

> I’ve got a cat…He’s a big part of my life. He waits at the front door. He’s very cute. He doesn’t like being left at home all alone. It’s nice to come home to something as opposed to just an empty house (Karen).

Some nights, if I’ve been away or I’m going away [my dog will] go and be babysat with Mum and Dad, so I’ll come home to an empty house. And while he makes absolutely no noise, and he obviously doesn’t talk or anything, it’s deathly quiet in the house and I really notice his
absence. And I just see his basket or a toy and I think ‘Ah, I miss you’, sort of thing. When he’s not home, for even a night, it’s just so obvious to me, there’s like a big hole (Lola).

[My dog is] beside himself with excitement when I get home and it’s nice to go home to that rather than an empty unit (Tracey).

When [my last cat] died, the worst thing was coming home to this empty house. Even though cats don’t really make […] they’re usually asleep on the bed or whatever, just having a sentient presence there, and they usually, like dogs, they’ll come trotting out when you come home and say ‘Hello, are you going to feed me?’ (Sara).

There’s a difference between being alone and being lonely, and the dog, I think, has played a good role there. I think if I got home to an empty house, then I think it would have been different (Rourke).

The value pet owning participants place upon their homes being not ‘empty’ when they get home, points to culturally idealised notions of ‘homes’ being ‘full’ of life, love, and family, and to the diametric positioning of sole occupant homes, or ‘empty houses’. At the same time, even though the value pets add to solo living is most often framed in terms of pets’ ability to create an inhabited home, as Rourke’s story clearly illustrates, an equally if not higher value is placed on pets’ non-human qualities:

The whole reason for getting the dog, and it was a half a joke but there was an underlying truth to it, because I’d come home from work and the kids were on the lounge and floor playing with something and [my ex wife] would be in the kitchen and I’d walk in the door and the kids would look up and go ‘Oh hi Dad’ and go back to what they were doing, and I’d walk into the kitchen and [my ex] would complain about how miserable her day was, and I’d go, ‘Hello, what about me? Anybody what to know what I did today?’ So I said, ‘Well why don’t we get a dog because at least the dog’s going to be wagging its tail and jumping all over me when I get home from work’, and sure enough, I’d come home from work and the dog would jump all over me every night, and to this day, eight years old, I come home at nighttimes and he’s racing down the driveway and he’s wagging his tail and he’s bouncing and I give this two minute interaction where I’m roughing him up and patting him and it’s lovely… [My dog is] low maintenance, he doesn’t bitch about his day, he doesn’t complain about how neglectful I am, he just adores me (Rourke).
Given that his marital home was not ‘empty’, it appears that Rourke’s dog’s inhuman ability to be consistently overjoyed to provide an enthusiastic welcome and any amount of unconditional and non-judgemental loving attention is more valued by Rourke than the dog’s ability to just be there. Thia and Bella also express the common appreciation of pets’ non-human qualities:

Had I known the joy of dogs when I was 20 I would never have bothered with humans. I just love dogs… It’s just, you know what it’s like, it’s all the good things you want in a man. The ability to hold the buggers and the warmth of another without all the crap. The warmth of this creature and I’ve said to a lot of my poor married girlfriends ‘Thank god for the dog, I can go home and she doesn’t nag me. She just wants some food, a bit of play’. It’s just a different interaction (Thia).

People aren’t always who you think they are, or their lives take different directions. So yeah it’s easier to trust yourself. It’s easier to trust your pets as well (Bella).

McNicholas and associates (2005) point out that the qualities that are valued in pets are often qualities that tend to be elusive in humans (McNicholas et al., 2005: 1253). As Bella puts it, ‘people can change’. Pets, conversely, can be relied upon to be a consistent source of unconditional, non-judgemental affection throughout the entire span of their lives. Pets are also unlikely to challenge the power dynamic of the relationship. Franklin proposes that the widespread development of strong emotional attachments to animals can be accounted for in terms of a late modern “crisis of intimacy” (Franklin, 2007: 12). He argues that contemporary ontological security is linked to the relationships which provide daily norms and cultural exchanges such as family, friends, workplace and neighbourhood ties, which are also the relationships most at risk from changes in both the neoliberal economy and the new flexibilities and freedoms in domestic norms. Thus, he suggests, pets provide a substitute for a range of increasingly tenuous domestic and community relationships between humans (Franklin, 1999: 5).
New Forms of Intimacy

While Franklin’s proposal that pets provide a substitute for human relationships is reflected in some respondents’ stories, other participants suggest that pets do not provide substitutes for, but are experienced as rewarding relationships in their own right. For example, Rourke, who is preparing to move in with his current partner following a seven-year period of solo living, discusses his concern that the move will interrupt an established and valued relationship with his dog:

There is a lot [I value] about the coming home and you’ve got the house to yourself and you’ve got the dog and so that’s the bit that I’m not sure how I’m going to go, to lose that by moving in with [my current partner]. The jury’s out on how well I adjust to that because I do value it (Rourke).

Rourke’s story demonstrates that relationships with pets are treasured by some participants and contribute to what Franklin refers to as a late modern ‘hybridisation’ of the family form (Franklin, 2009: 351). In Britain, dog ownership increased sixty-six percent between the 1960s and the 1990s, while cat ownership increased by seventy-five percent (Franklin, 1999: 89). Franklin’s (2007) study on Australian pet ownership indicates that of all western societies, Australia has one of the highest levels of pet ownership, with pets living in around sixty-eight percent of Australian households — quite literally. Today, of Australian pet owners, eighty-eight percent describe their pets as ‘family’ (Franklin, 2009: 351), and the companionship, love and attention that pets can share with humans is now appreciated by the majority of people (Franklin, 1999: 104).

Numerous social researchers including Wood et al., (2005) and Franklin (2009) connect the rise in one-person households to increasing levels of pet ownership and the stories of pet owning participants provide insight into this connection. Julia’s
definition of a ‘relationship’ reflects broad social changes regarding the meaning and experience of intimacy:

My dogs are my companions... I mean they bring joy into my life and, you know, they do make it a home. Give you a bit of purpose I suppose... I mean they require care and nurturing and in their own way they give a bit back to me too. So it’s a relationship (Julia).

Characterised by Julia’s story, pet owning participants’ narratives point to the changing understandings about what constitutes an intimate relationship, and echo Franklin’s proposal that the sharing of domestic space, the structure of family, and the nature of companionability, are no longer seen as exclusively human (Franklin, 2007: 12). This provides insight into why, despite the common assumption that people who sustain primary relationships with pets are replacing human connections due to an inability to bond with other people (Walsh, 2009: 467), and the fact that the age old stereotype of mad women who live alone with cats is still in popular use, issues of stigma do not manifest in pet owning participants’ discussions about pets. Interestingly, however, participants without pets often employ negative stereotypes of people who live alone with pets as a marker of what they are not.

Summary

In this chapter I have explored the various ways that participants interact with the late modern changes in the nature and form of relationships and illustrated the different ways that participants connect socially beyond their inner circle of family and friends or work colleagues. I have argued that participants construct meaningful relationships in the virtual world, where connection is made or maintained with either people one has never met in person, or with loved ones who may or may not be spatially distant; in the retail world, where a sense of connection to others is
found in shopping centres; in domestic space with pets, and to a lesser extent, in communities, with neighbours or members of citizens’ groups. Because participants are often spatially distant from either the places they think of as home, or from the people in their inner circles, the internet provides a way of maintaining geographically dispersed social networks. Needs for social connection are therefore often met in the virtual world, which may contribute to respondents’ unwillingness to integrate into their local neighbourhoods. Neoliberal discourse and economic practice which enables and valorises independent consumers, and stigmatises dependence, may also foster a reluctance about, and diminish the need for, interaction between community members. Importantly, however, because most participants are not religious and do not have affiliations with local churches, and they do not have children so they are not associated with local schools, and they are not old enough to join senior citizens clubs, and local pubs are now distinctly anti-social pokies bars, shopping centres provide one of the few means of identifying with local communities. Issues of trust, risk, and stigma contribute to the general lack of neighbourhood involvement, which are each nuanced by socio-economic status. People from less privileged circumstances are more likely to perceive neighbours as potential risks to personal safety, whereas people who are better off tend to view neighbours as posing a risk to personal space and independence. Respondents who present their solo living as their first choice, who are also likely to enjoy socio-economic privilege, are well equipped to balance out the stigma of solo living and are thus less likely to feel like outsiders because they live alone. Thus the gendered and class mediated operation of stigma plays a significant role in respondents’ willingness or disinclination to integrate with people outside of the inner circle of close friends and family or the workplace.
Section Four

Solo Living in the Neoliberal Era
Chapter Nine - Anxiety, Ambivalence and Recuperation

Introduction

Until this point in this thesis I have focused upon the discursive social context within which participants are required to position themselves as solo living individuals, and explored how they construct experiences of intimacy and social connection within that context. I have argued that respondents’ narratives bring attention to a number of contradictory tensions within the contemporary social environment. The foremost of these, for people who live alone, is the tension which exists between the overriding idea that people should be self-directed, choosing, and autonomous individuals, and the implicit requirement that this choice will be cohabiting with a partner. Although individual autonomy is advanced by neoliberal rhetoric, if autonomous living is chosen instead of cohabiting, social approval or ‘normal’ status is withheld. Stigma is thus fundamentally linked to solo living, not only in broadly historical terms, but also in specifically contemporary terms. The current overt rhetoric surrounding the idea of choice, and the often implicit stigma associated with solo living thus provide the two overarching and contradictory dimensions which shape the way that participants narrate their experience of living alone. The extent to which participants are able to construct positive images of solo living is therefore somewhat contingent upon their ability to balance this tension. The quest for equilibrium requires respondents to continually vie for a position where they are confirmed, affirmed and valued, despite living alone.
In the preceding chapters I have argued that framing solo living as a choice provides the most effective means of negotiating the inherent tension. The disapproval associated with not complying with the tacit directive to make the ‘right’ choice to cohabit, can, to a greater or lesser extent, be compensated by the demonstration of other socially approved choices. I have explored how the necessity to perpetually balance the tension between choice and stigma effects participants’ constructions and experiences of intimacy and networks of social connection. Across the entire range of fields that I investigated, including career, sexual relationships, friends, family, neighbourhoods and communities, restorative work involving the perpetual weighing of social approval with social disapproval produces a strong theme of ambivalence and a myriad of individual tracings of the various dimensions of social life. In this chapter I discuss some of the effects and outcomes of this ambivalence.

The dominant idea that people are ‘supposed’ to cohabit with a partner requires respondents to negotiate the fears that cohabiting partnerships are said to quell. Thus solo living is invariably set up in contrast to being in a coupled relationship, and the benefits of living alone, such as freedom, space, and being one’s own decider, are balanced against fears and anxieties about the future, loneliness, and whether or not they are ‘normal’ because they live alone. The narratives illuminate the symbolic concept of loneliness which mediates the subjective and lived experience. In the lived reality, loneliness is experienced in the present as a link with depression, anxiety, ill health, unsatisfactory employment, poverty, or feeling unable to find a partner, and as an outcome of the neoliberal discourse fostering the belief that individuals are culpable for their individual malaises, each of these issues has a symbolic value which fuses to stigma. So symbolically, loneliness is
amalgamated with stigma, and because solo living is culturally constructed as inherently lonely, this taken for granted loneliness is a key site of respondents’ ambivalence. Irrespective of whether they experience loneliness in the present, the symbolic and abstract concept of loneliness is often reflected in a characteristic concern about the possibility of feeling lonely in old age. The symbolic meaning of loneliness in the broader discourse thus links to the lived experience of loneliness, or it is experienced in an abstract way as something that respondents expect to be confronted by in the future. A further outcome of the obligatory and consistent weighing up of the pros and cons of solo living is that respondents’ offer a critique as to whether coupled relationships prevent loneliness. In order to explore these various outcomes, in this chapter I will move from sociological discourse and the focus upon social context, to terrain that is also chartered and made sense of by medical, psychological and psychiatric literature, and then into popular self-help discourse. The various and sometimes conflicting constructions of meaning stemming from these fields converge around the responsibility participants understand themselves to bear in avoiding loneliness and depression. In the following section I explore the resulting complexities, ambiguities and ambivalence around the issue of loneliness.

**Loneliness**

Studies of loneliness have traditionally been focused on the elderly, however, recent research in Australia, Canada and New Zealand has focused on the growth of the one-person household (Franklin, 2009: 347). Michael Flood’s comprehensive study of loneliness in Australia suggests that for Australian adults aged between twenty-five and forty-four, the most important ‘risk factor’ for loneliness is living alone.
(Flood, 2005: 36). This is more so for solo living men than women. Franklin finds that approximately thirty-three percent of men aged twenty-five to forty-four who live alone agree with the statement, ‘I often feel very lonely’, compared to twenty-three percent of solo living women (Franklin and Tranter, 2008: 3). These figures suggest that for the majority of people, living alone does not translate into loneliness. As Rourke puts it: ‘there’s a difference between living alone and being lonely’. Although Flood has identified solo living as a key ‘risk factor’, people who live with others report very similar levels of loneliness. Following Bauman, Franklin (2009) argues that the contemporary preoccupation with social networks and the quantity of relationships, has diminished the general quality of relationships, and people are currently reporting a sense of loneliness within families, coupled partnerships, social occasions, and active social networks. In other words, people do not need to be alone to feel lonely. This is verified by Franklin and Tranter who conclude that approximately thirty-six percent of Australians are “chronically lonely” — a figure which increases to forty-two percent in the twenty-five to forty-four age cohort (Franklin and Tranter, 2008: 10). Despite this generalised loneliness, however, there is a strong conceptual link between loneliness and living alone.

In Chapter Four I referred to Denise Riley’s (2002) discussion of the pathologisation of the solitary and her contention that despite the rapid growth of the one-person household, to be without social bonds is indefensible, and the admission of loneliness remains a rigid social taboo (Riley, 2002: 9). This taboo is reflected in the well-established knowledge that due to the associated social stigma, the use of the word loneliness in survey instruments produces underreporting (de
Jong, 1998: 74). For example, Victor et al., (2000) used both qualitative and quantitative instruments in their research on loneliness and found that thirty-eight percent of participants reported significant loneliness in the quantitative study, which increased to fifty-eight percent when surveyed by qualitative methods (Victor et al., 2000). The pathologisation of the solitary discussed by Riley is, in one sense, also reflected in a large body of research suggesting that loneliness is linked to ill health (Andersson, 2010; de Jong, 1998; Franklin and Tranter, 2008; Flood, 2005; Franklin, 2009). Even though there are a myriad of medical conditions linked to loneliness, loneliness itself does not have a diagnostic category, and researchers are dependent upon the self-reporting of a subjective state in their analysis of it. This is complicated because, as I demonstrate in the following section, loneliness is a mobile, fluid and contested term that represents different things to different participants at different times.

Many participants explain that loneliness was a problem when they first began to live alone, which they have since learned to accommodate. At the far ends of the spectrum are those who describe loneliness as an inevitable aspect of solo living, and those who maintain that living alone is never lonely. Some respondents associate loneliness with the lack of a partner or being at a different life stage from their friends, and many feel lonely in times of emotional or physical vulnerability. Jen’s ideas about loneliness characteristically encompass several of these dimensions and illustrate the common association between loneliness and fears about ageing:

I look at maybe twenty years down the line and I think that [loneliness] could be frightening, mainly because I don’t own a home. So the idea of ‘Where am I going to live?’ and that type of thing. I guess it’s more practical than being lonely. I don’t really get lonely and that could be
because I’ve made myself that way, because otherwise it can eat you away. You know you can be so miserable if you allow yourself to be lonely... I ring people. A lot of friends are interstate so I go on holidays each year, quite often to see friends or go to a city where friends are. I mean, I might stay in a hotel. That’s another thing that’s changed a bit. Whenever I used to go and see friends, I always used to stay with them and I’ve found in the last few years that I’d much rather stay in a hotel... So I see the people but I don’t have to spend twenty-four hours a day with them. I like going back to the hotel room where I can have my own space. I guess it’s more, the fear of the future is being on my own when I’m much older and what are my living circumstances going to be? (Jen).

By describing the pleasure she finds in her ‘own space’ during her interstate visits, Jen balances her desire for connectedness with her love of independence, but at the same time, the fearful connections she makes between loneliness and ageing, undermine her position. The association between loneliness and ageing, as Rick further demonstrates, is a common source of ambivalence:

Loneliness is a worry that I push to the back of my head, the back of my mind. Because I feel that there’s no point in worrying about it and getting me down now. However, it is a concern that as I grow older that if I keep on this path, I’m just afraid that I’ll end up one of those grumpy old men. Lives alone, a bit of a sad sack and the kids point to and say ‘Ha, ha, ha, ha’ and that sort of thing. I mean that’s stereotypical: the old bloke that kids throw rocks at – well that’s what I used to do when I was a kid. Not quite, no not quite, but you get what I mean. I do get lonely. There’s only so many conversations I can have with my cats until they look at me and say ‘Will you shut up?’ No, they walk away and go to sleep or say ‘Just feed us, you just had dinner. Entertain us’ (Rick).

Rick’s counterbalances his admission of feeling lonely in the present with ambivalent humour, but his worries about loneliness in the imagined future, where he associates loneliness with ageing and the social stigma of being old and alone, thwart his attempt to find resolution.

Adele and Lola shed light on the common association that respondents draw between ageing and loneliness:
No I’m not lonely. I tend to be more overwhelmed. Like yesterday we had to go for our departmental lunch and I thought ‘Oh I have to mix with all these people’ [groan]. I’m not that fond of that…so lonely, no… I worry about being a vegetable in a wheelchair in a nursing home. But I’m hoping that I’ll know that’s happening so I’ll be able to jump off a cliff or something. Do something to ward that off. I don’t want to be a vegetable, so I worry about that, but I don’t worry about being alone. And I think people that have had children and everything to make sure they’re not lonely are in for a bad time. They might be all right. They might send them a postcard from their home in the Bahamas or wherever they are (Adele).

A lot of people say to me ‘Don’t you get scared about dying alone?’ And I think ‘Well even if I was married I’m still going to die alone. Even if I had ten kids, I’m still going to die alone’. I know heaps of family members who’ve got six to eight kids and they all died alone. And the kids all grow up. They have their own kids. So I don’t actually buy into that dying alone. Everyone will die alone. Married, single divorced. I believe it (Lola).

**Future Loneliness**

By drawing out the contradictions in the discourse supporting the belief that ageing alone is a ‘problem’, Lola and Adele separate the issues of ageing and loneliness, and challenge the assumption that the family unit or a partner can provide insurance against the tragedy of ‘dying alone’. In doing so, they characterise the scepticism of many participants regarding the reliability, durability, and ability of intimate relationships to address the problems associated with ageing. People who have partners and families, as Adele and Lola point out, are equally subject to fears about ageing, and perhaps more so, as the dread of the bereavement of a partner adds a further dimension. Lola and Adele’s ability to separate the issues is unusual. Far more often, drawing on the symbolic meaning, the idea of future loneliness is an indistinguishable conglomeration of fear about being old, unhealthy, alone, dependent, and stigmatised for being so. But when separated out, the fear of being alone is not generally a significant concern. In fact, unlike Adele, in an interesting
reversal of the dominant couple/homeowner fear and aversion of ‘going into a home’, some participants imagine that cohabiting in a retirement facility will provide welcome future support. Moreover, many participants spend a considerable amount of time alone and find, like Lola does, that they enjoy it:

My idea of a really good Saturday night, if you really want to hear it, is cooking dinner, watching Iron Chef on SBS followed by Rock Wiz and then falling asleep watching some European movie. It’s the best. That to me is an ideal Saturday night. And a lot of people think ‘No wonder you’re single’... I wouldn’t dare have anyone with me. What if they answered all the questions? It’s my show! I have my dog and he’s always asleep next to me, and he’s the only company I need. That sounds so sad but it’s true...There’s nothing like coming home and just cooking whatever I feel like eating…and watching TV. It’s so indulgent. I don’t know many people that would be happy to just sit there and watch Iron Chef, but I love it (Lola).

Lola knows that within the broad social context her story ‘sounds sad’ and she balances this against her choice for solitude. However, even though she does not feel that solo living is lonely and her fears about loneliness in the future are not linked to living alone, Lola imagines that the pending loss of her parents will cause future loneliness:

As I see my parents slowing down, I’m starting to see that the way my life has been will probably change soon. By losing one of them or both of them. So I don’t anticipate that I would be lonely wanting company of someone else, but I anticipate that I will have that missing my mother or my father or whoever, and that will probably have a sense of loneliness...Yeah I do anticipate that later on I will be alone... But yeah, if I had a concern or a fear, that would be it, just losing those people that are special to me (Lola).

Lola’s anxiety is amplified by a compilation of the popular discourse which pathologises ageing, political discourse about what is framed as the social problem of the ageing population, discourse linking the future with risk, and the associated symbolic merger between ageing, loneliness, and fear. Together these provide a discursive context which takes up Lola’s private anxiety, and the contradictions between the discourse and her lived experience are a source of ambivalence. Lola’s
characteristic ambivalence thus emphasises how she negotiates the taken for
granted-ness of the set of assumptions informing the symbolic concept of loneliness.
Although Lola believes that marriage and family do not provide a guarantee against
future loneliness, and she treasures her time alone, she also thinks that because she
lives alone, she is likely to fall victim to the horrors represented by the symbolic
concept of future loneliness. So, Lola’s story underlines the three interlinked
dimensions of loneliness that respondents are negotiating. These dimensions consist
of one which involves feelings about loneliness in the present, another pertaining to
fears and anxieties about loneliness in the future, and the other encompasses the
abstract realm in which personal experiences link with the symbolic construction of
loneliness. In other words, in addition to the lived experience of loneliness, there is
an abstract symbolic meaning in the broader discourse that respondents’ lived
experience links to. The scale and impact of the links between the symbolic
meaning and the lived experience is arbitrated by the extent to which respondents’
experiences accord with the dominant ideas informing the symbolic concept. For
example, for respondents who do not fear ageing in a nursing home, the symbolic
concept of future loneliness has little impact, and the idea of ageing is linked with
welcome community support. For those who feel loneliness in the present, the
symbolic concept of loneliness amplifies and compounds their experience.

Adding to the complexity around the concept of loneliness, the neoliberal discourse
supporting the belief that individuals are the masters of their own individual
experiences, promotes the idea that, like everything else, loneliness (in the present,
at least) is a choice. Drawing on this, participants often describe the practices,
techniques and methods they have chosen to depose loneliness and allow them to
evade sanctions against extended solitude and to ‘just get on with’ living alone:
You can get a bit lonely but I think the more you live alone, you get used to it, and it’s sort of like, especially for women, you’re conditioned to think you need to have a partner at all times sort of thing. So, if you’ve had that upbringing you sort of have to get that out of your head. So that self-talk has to sort of stop. You have to think ‘Well this is okay’. So, the longer you’re on your own, you start to think, ‘Well I can do this, and this is all right’...so it actually gets better over time (Bella).

By implementing routines and strategies, such as Bella’s reprogramming of her ‘self-talk’, respondents seek to address and counter fears of loneliness by taking control of their loneliness. In the previous chapters I have demonstrated that participants build complex matrices of connectedness, which include relationships with pets, family, work colleagues, friends, or virtual connections to emphasise the ways that they are connected and valued. However, as I have pointed out above, the issue of loneliness can prove difficult to successfully incorporate into this matrix. Sennett’s (1986) proposal which I referred to in Chapter One, provides further insight into this difficulty. To recap, Sennett argues that three of the elemental principles underpinning contemporary social life are the idea that close relationships between people are a moral good, that identity is constructed through practices of intimacy, and that dissonant human relations are the cause of all personal and social difficulties (Sennett, 1986, 259-61). Following this, the understanding that close relations are a moral good, implies that to be alone is a moral bad (or to lack cohabiting personal relations is a moral weakness). In this way the term loneliness embodies significant and negative meaning, and because of the discourse of individual responsibility, it incorporates an element of personal blame. The person who is presumed to be lonely is pathologised and judged to be morally wanting, and people who live alone are, by default, presumed to be lonely. Thus, as Shannon’s story demonstrates, it is often this set of assumptions which renders loneliness salient.
I often get asked ‘Don’t you get lonely?’ And I often say, ‘No I don’t’. Every now and then I do...I had a bit of a pang the other day and it was we had a bowling night, and I actually wasn’t going to go. I didn’t feel like it, and then at the last minute I decided, and I said ‘Is there anyone I can slip in with the team?’ And they said ‘Yeah, we’ll put you in with this lady. Do you mind playing with her kids?’ ‘No, not a problem, I’m really happy to do that’. And she rang me, and one of the first things she said to me was, ‘Haven’t you got anybody to go with?’ And just that. That’s sometimes when it hurts, is when people just don’t understand your situation I guess, and sometimes that’s when you sort of think, ‘Well am I lonely?’ or you know, ‘Am I?’...and maybe that little bit of loneliness creeped in because of feeling pressured into it. Sometimes the social pressure does come into it. The social pressure sometimes makes me feel lonely (Shannon).

Demonstrating her internalisation of the discourse, Shannon interprets the question ‘Haven’t you got anybody to go with?’ as an attack on the adequacy of her character – the implication being that she has no friends. Her story suggests that what the ‘social pressure’ makes her feel is not actually lonely, but inadequate or bad. Many other participants, including Tracey, make the link between feelings of social inadequacy and loneliness:

[Loneliness] does get to me. I suppose because of the family [being interstate] as well, and when I first moved here, [my good friend] had just met somebody, now she’s about to have a baby. She got married and everything and I tended to, for some reason when I left Brisbane all my friends had paired up, married, they’re all on their way. Then there was me. I constantly seemed to be the odd number at the end of the dining table... I had my moments where I would probably just sit home and have a really good cry because it does get really lonely because I want somebody in my life. But it does scare me being thirty-five and wanting a family and knowing that there’s, you know, the clock’s ticking sort of thing. So that does get me down occasionally... Um and the whole not feeling like you’re good enough and all that kind of usual issue sort of thing that girls tend to have more so than guys I think (Tracey).

Tracey’s metaphor of her ‘clock ticking’ while her friends are ‘on their way’ implies she feels left behind in the endeavour to start a family. In linking her loneliness to her single status and feelings of inadequacy derived from her understanding that she has failed to achieve the correct life stage, she demonstrates a further theme in
stories about loneliness. Riley (2002) argues that the acceptance of new family forms, allows the majority of people to aspire to the iconic superiority of ‘the family’ while those without a stake in, or claim to, family, are cast as the truly recalcitrant in a liberal social environment. Riley’s argument provides insight into Tracey’s characteristic anxiety about being ‘the odd number at the end of the dining table’ and the prospect of being trapped in permanent alterity. In this way, to be cast as lonely is to be cast as other.

Anxiety

In Chapter One I discussed Renata Salecl’s (2003, 2008, 2010) investigations into the high levels of anxiety in contemporary society. Salecl proposes that anxiety provides the momentum for the neoliberal market which thrives on people’s inadequacy. Rather than just the retailing of goods, today’s capitalism relies upon the creation of an ideal with which people identify. Marketing strategies promote the idea that the ideal is unattainable but it is essential to create one’s best approximation of it. So there is no need for us to try to become someone else, but rather, to identify our own unique qualities and improve them through consumption. Fashionable advertising slogans such as ‘You owe it to yourself’ to ‘Be the best you can be’ because ‘You’re worth it’ characterise this ethos. At the same time, popular advice and prohibitions offered by magazines, self-help television gurus, and the like, stimulate guilt about not living up to ideals. Salecl argues that people have thus become anxious, not about being unable to successfully emulate someone else, but about being unable to produce a satisfying and pleasing self. The unease that had we made different choices we might be happier, and fears about our adequacy as autonomous individuals who are capable of making ‘good’ choices, invite us to
exist in a perpetual state of uncertainty (Salecl, 2008: 165). Salecl thus contends that neoliberal discourse has contributed to today’s proliferation of anxiety related disorders including depression, eating disorders and any number of addictions, which she links to the notion that we have the freedom to create a self-image that we are happy with, and in turn, bear the responsibility for failing to do so.

Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, Salecl argues that choice always involves loss. When we choose one thing, we lose another, and loss is known to provoke anxiety. To lessen the anxiety related to choice, people tend to make middle-of-the-road choices, thereby diminishing the risk of being stigmatised for their decisions, at the same time as attempting to avoid any other potentially negative consequences (Salecl, 2003, 2008, 2010). Salecl’s argument sheds an alternative light upon the prevalent ambivalence around the issue of loneliness. For example, in his discussion of loneliness, Josh, who, as I have discussed in Chapter Six, experiences addictions and anxieties, demonstrates both the links that Salecl has made between choice, loss, and anxiety, and illustrates that loneliness adds a further dimension to this complexity:

I’m getting quite tired of living alone because of the loneliness. I’ve had relationships over the past twenty years and it’s been really good because they had their own places and so spending several nights with your partner at her house, and then you can come back to your own space, which is good. Sometimes you just need your own space without someone being there in your face and if the relationship’s not going so well, having your own space and your own place to go back to and think about things is good. I don’t want to rush into things, because I want to get to know a person well. Because once you’re living together, I guess your personal space is gone, and you have to get on quite well with that person, and once they move in, there’s no going back really. Not unless you have a major disagreement. I just want to be one-hundred percent sure that when I do move in with someone that I make sure that it’s the right thing because you’re not sure, you know, if you’re going to irritate them, you know, or some days you just want to be left alone. The truth is, I’ve never lived with anyone before and I would like to try it and see how it goes (Josh).
Josh expresses anxiety about his potential choice to cohabit and wants the choice to be ‘one-hundred percent’ guaranteed. His story suggests that at one level, he accepts that his desire to live alone and his desire to find a cohabiting partner are in conflict with one another. However, rather than claiming this position outright and abandoning the quest to resolve the conflict, his strategy of perpetually weighing up the alternatives, allows him to maintain solo living without rejecting the desire to establish a cohabiting partnership and thus risk his social acceptability. Josh’s story emphasises the ambivalence which converges at the interface between choice, solo living, and loneliness, and his strategy of framing the future as an ‘open book’ of possibility, is a typical and often used counterbalancing device.

In the previous section I have argued that loneliness is a culturally loaded term. Loneliness can mark its presumed subject as other, inadequate, and morally bad, weak or lacking, and thus pitiable and without power or agency. Adding to this, the discourse of choice encourages participants to feel guilty and ashamed if they acknowledge that they feel lonely. The symbolic concept of loneliness, which encompasses various assumptions about what loneliness is, can therefore be understood to be operating within the contemporary social environment as a subsidiary of stigma, functioning to ensure the perpetuation of the family-normative status quo. Like stigma, even if participants do not feel lonely, by virtue of living alone, they are required to negotiate presumptions of loneliness in the social world, and/or fears about loneliness in the future. Unlike stigma, however, which is widely understood as a social phenomena, the lived experience of loneliness is a symbolically imbued, but subjective state, which may make it more difficult to resist. At the same time, despite its symbolic dimensions, some participants feel
lonely, in that they pine for company. In the following section I therefore explore the links between loneliness and participants’ experiences of depression.

**Depression**

It is possibly significant that around three-quarters of the people I interviewed recounted some experience of depression. While some of this group do not link their depression with living alone, many describe complex relationships between personal problems, loneliness, stigma, depression and solo living. Like loneliness, depression is an indistinct, ambiguous and multifaceted term, very much simplified by the biomedical diagnosis which participants typically draw upon in their descriptions. Many participants consider their depression to be a medical disorder, and their doctors treat it as such. Often experiences of depression are linked to other issues of ill health, the breakdown of relationships, the experience of being single, loneliness in its various facets, the uncertainty of contract and casual employment, the experience of living alone itself, the sense of being at the incorrect life stage, and as a dominant undertone, to the associated self-blame. This suggests, that like loneliness, depression is also a symbolic concept which mediates the lived experience. The predominant discourse around depression posits that stress associated with social defeat, humiliation, entrapment, loss, danger, rejection and social exclusion can cause the onset of depression, which produces a medical disorder requiring medical intervention (Monroe et al., 2008: 344; Brown, 2002). Links have been found between social stigma, experiences of discrimination and an increased risk of depression (Ross et al., 2008: 2). Links have also been found between depression and a sense of not ‘belonging’ or of being lonely (Brown, 2002: 260). Andersson’s (2010) review of loneliness research reveals that loneliness has
been consistently found to be connected with depression. Andersson proposes that depression, loneliness and anxiety form a ‘syndrome’ but points out that it is very difficult to discern which condition precedes the other (Andersson, 2010: 268).

The syndrome of anxiety, depression, and loneliness described by Andersson is reflected in a number of respondents’ narratives. Simon’s story demonstrates that as Andersson points out, it is difficult to determine which condition within the syndrome is causal:

Yeah recently [I’ve been feeling depressed], yeah real bad, tears, thinking ‘Life see you later’. I’ve had that. I’ve never sort of revealed that to anyone except another mate who picked up on something. So he wrote something in an email. It was a lot easier to write it down… It was all about ‘Where am I heading? What am I doing? Where am I going? Your routine gets to you and I didn’t see suicide as being selfish. I saw it as based on people’s limitations. I can understand that. And I’m not trying to get all dark. I’m not saying I’m going to off myself, but you do get to that stage where, I think people will reach a certain limitation on whatever that limitation is, and go ‘I have no resolve, I don’t want this, I don’t know where I’m going. I’m totally lost, I don’t affect anyone’. Because when I’m going for jogs, I go, just hypothetically, as you do, I go ‘What if I wasn’t here anymore?’ You go, ‘Who would that affect?’ And you ring [people], you know, ‘Oh yeah, we’re taking the kids off, we’re doing this’, you know, ‘Oh yeah fine’. Oh yeah, but pretty much you’re going to be fine as well. If you’re in a couple situation you have those physical and psychological crutches there for you, you know, someone to hold you or whatever. So that’s the only two people that I can really think of [who I affect] is my sister and my mum. So I was thinking how they would deal with it. Um sure, they’d be shocked, but ‘You guys will get over it’ and so that’s something that you really entertain (Simon).

Simon’s depression is linked to his anxiety about feeling ‘totally lost’ in regard to where his life is heading. His feeling that he does not affect anyone compounds this. The dominant understanding that we are the solo producers of our own lives, and his feeling of being so ineffective in that venture that he does not matter to anyone, leaves Simon ‘entertaining’ the notion of suicide. Rather than offering a critique of a society which privileges the family unit, stigmatises solo living, and encourages
an individualistic survival-of-the-fittest rationality, Simon considers suicide as a possible means of addressing *individual* limitations. Simon is by no means alone in this thinking as in the discussion of depression, for a variety of different reasons, one fifth of the respondents described contemplations of suicide.

In Chapter Seven I argued that although life course discourse has moved on from rigid mid-twentieth century notions about ‘appropriate’ and ‘healthy’ ascensions to the prescribed life stages of marriage and childrearing, ideas about solo living equating with immaturity stemming from such, constitute a popular contemporary discourse which is markedly evident in respondents’ narratives. Many participants describe anxiety about being at a different life stage from their friends, and others feel that being at different life stages has caused estrangement from their former social groups. I argued that the reinvigoration of the idea that marriage and childrearing are ‘healthy’ life stages, contributes to the idealisation of family-normativity, and facilitates the neoliberal agenda of reducing social responsibilities by emphasising the centrality and responsibilities of the individual family unit. The effect of this on participants is illustrated in the connections they make between life stages and the discontent, loneliness, depression, stigma, and sometimes the pleasure, they experience in living alone. For example, in Jasmine’s case, it is the ‘status’ of being single rather than the practicalities of being single that can lead to depression:

If anything, it’s the fact of my single status [that makes me depressed] less than the living alone part of life. People make comments. *What sort of comments? (Ruthie)*

Oh just ‘Why haven’t you found anyone yet?’ Well why haven’t they found me, you know? ‘Wouldn’t you have liked to have a baby by now?’ You know, that sort of thing. It’s all of this by a certain age you should have done this and by the end of next decade you should have done that. ‘You’d be old enough now that your kids would be in school and you could be enjoying your life’. And it’s like ‘Well, great’. It’s like
‘I didn’t catch that train’. Oh you might dwell on it for thirty seconds and think ‘Yeah it’d be nice’, but that’s not what it is, so you know, you make the best of the situation you’re in at the time and you dwell too much on it and you do become depressed and you do become sour and bitter… It’s just all those outer pressures (Jasmine).

Although experienced as a subjective state that she sees as her responsibility, Jasmines’ depression is symbolically informed. This is the same dynamic I referred to above which plays out between the lived experience and the symbolic construction of loneliness. In the same way, in addition to the lived experience of depression, there is an abstract symbolic meaning of depression in the broader discourse that some respondents link their lived experience to. For example, instead of describing a personal deficit, Jasmine links her depression to single status, life stages, and outer pressures. This contrasts with the overwhelming majority of research investigating depression which is undertaken within the disciplines of psychology and psychiatry and where there is only limited investigation into how the malaise of society influences the individual’s malaise, and vice versa (Williams, 1982: 70; Brown, 2002, 1982; Salecl, 2009: 175). Illustrating the ways in which depression is culturally mediated, Kleinman (2004) argues that depression is common to all societies and ethnic groups, but the way in which depression is conceptualised and managed differs (Kleinman, 2004: 951). Kringelbach and Berridge (2010) suggest that the mitigation of ‘negative emotions’ is more important in individualistic societies (Kringelbach and Berridge, 2010: 663), and Brown (2002) argues that even where a medical diagnosis’ of depression exists, it is likely that there will also be significant input from the social environment (Brown, 2002: 262). Furthermore, Monroe and associates’ (2008) study inquiring into whether hardship related to lower SES leads to depression or whether depression
leads to lower SES, found that lower SES leads to depression, particularly for women (Monroe et al., 2008: 341).

The Neoliberal Production of Depression

Elsbeth Probyn (2005) discusses the neoliberal emphasis on personal responsibility for emotional life and argues that the individualising neoliberal discourse intensifies the ascription of ‘weakness’ to people who differ in some way from established norms. As Salecl also does, Probyn points out that rather than recognising the inherent problems within the social value system, the individual response to perceived difference often becomes self-pathologisation. According to the Australian support organisation for people experiencing depression, Beyond Blue, approximately twenty percent of Australians experience depression over the course of their lives, and at present, depression is the leading cause of ‘non-fatal disability’ in Australia (Begg, 2007). The profusion of depression can therefore perhaps be understood, at least in part, as a product of the neoliberal social environment. Not only does neoliberal discourse lead people to anxiety and self-pathologisation, but as Kleinman argues, the shift in western norms and conceptualisations of depression are influenced by a professional culture of mental health driven by the market enterprise of the pharmaceutical industry (Kleinman, 2004: 952).

In Chapter One I discussed Barbara Ehrenreich’s (2009) investigation into the discourse of positive thinking which adds a further dimension to the neoliberal production of depression. Ehrenreich proposes that the message disseminated by the discourse of positive thinking is that improving one’s situation in life is contingent upon having a positive attitude and the difficulties people encounter are a product of
their own negative attitudes. Ehrenreich argues that encouraging people who are unemployed or experiencing poverty or other difficulties to believe that all they have to do is improve their attitudes, is not only delusional and cruel, but has a powerful effect to repress dissent.

Following Ehrenreich’s argument, the syndrome of depression, loneliness and anxiety proposed by Andersson, is further compounded for those participants who are either socially disadvantaged and/or would like to find and cohabit with a partner. These people often believe that their current circumstances and their experiences of loneliness and depression are a product of, not only their choices, but also their failure to implement successful positive thinking. So, as well as being difficult to discern which of anxiety, loneliness, and depression precedes the other within these participants’ narratives, it is also difficult to determine which condition is which. This could suggest than rather than three separate states, for some participants, loneliness, anxiety and depression are compounded and amalgamated by virtue of their relationship to the overarching dimensions of stigma and choice which solo living requires them to negotiate. Shannon’s story illustrates this complicated position. After discussing whether she lives alone by choice, Shannon, as did many others, subsequently returned to the matter of choice:

I said [my solo living is] a hundred percent personal choice, but probably I could bring it down a little bit. Because like I said, I do find [living alone] harder. It would be nice to share the finances, but I just find that there’s not people out there my age who are looking to share. It’s not an easy thing. It is about control, it really is. Controlling your environment... I’m not against relationships, I’m not against being married or even living with someone, but I’ve just never met the right man, and I think it all comes back to that independence thing... I have a strong sense of what I want and I know I do put men off when I just do everything for myself... It’s something I don’t realise that I do, but it’s quite often brought up in relationships. I make them feel left out, and maybe I just haven’t met the right person (Shannon).
Shannon reassesses the extent to which her choice has contributed to her solo living by acknowledging the social circumstances around which share housing over the age of thirty became difficult for her. She imagines that if people within her age cohort were readily available to share housing with, she might like to cohabit with others. Having experienced some difficulties with share housing in the past, however, she feels that although it is financially difficult, living alone affords her valued independence and control. At the same time, while she imagines that she simply has not met the right man yet, she also thinks that she is responsible for her ongoing single status. Not only does she worry that her independence causes her relationships with men to break down, she also links it to a traumatic experience of stigmatisation:

I went through a really bad harassment by two [work colleagues] and what it boiled down to was they couldn’t understand how I could be me. Because I would do my own thing. I wasn’t, I guess, your normal [work colleague]. I lived on my own. If we were out partying, quite often I’d go ‘I’m going home now’, and they’d find that quite weird... This was quite bad, it nearly, you know, I had a breakdown, all that sort of stuff. Had a car driven at me, you know, it was really bad harassment. And I often think I have payed a price for my independence... Depression has been in my life. [My] bulimia and that is a result of [depression]. I still get [depression] occasionally, but you’ve just got to try and psyche yourself out of it. It’s not that easy. I sometimes wonder if I had shared a house, coming home and talking to someone, it may not have seemed so bad (Shannon).

Shannon describes the sense of anxiety that Salecl links to the perpetual uncertainty about whether different choices would make for a better outcome. Simultaneously, Shannon acknowledges that to some extent, her solo living is not entirely a choice. If social circumstances were different, she may have more options from which to choose. Nevertheless, as some other women do, she worries that the independence of solo living breaks the conventions of heteronormativity and therefore diminishes the likelihood of establishing a conjugal partnership. She blames herself and her
desire for independence for her single status and the stigmatising she experiences. Earlier in this chapter I discussed the way that Shannon interprets other people’s questions about whether she is lonely as an attack on her moral fibre. Accordingly, she denies that solo living is lonely, but at the same time, she suspects that living alone may have contributed to her ongoing experience with depression. To add to this, Shannon feels she should be able to combat her depression with positive thinking, but finds, that like share housing, ‘it’s not that easy’.

Shannon’s narrative illustrates that within the overarching dimension of choice and stigma, the anxiety, uncertainty and loss associated with choice, and the discourse of positive thinking, create a dynamic potential for loneliness and depression. This is especially but not exclusively so for those respondents who are socially disadvantaged and/or those who would like to find cohabiting partners. By being confronted with the reality that there are circumstances which render the power to choose impotent, these participants are faced with the contradictory fallibility of the discourse. Often without the means to crucially evaluate this, however, the discursive contradictions, including those supporting social inequality, are transposed into an ambivalent conglomeration of shame, guilt, and anxiety about personal failings and choices, which in turn, translate feelings about loneliness and stigma into depression.

**Resistance, Change and The Future**

Shannon’s story simultaneously draws attention to another distinct but related theme in the narratives. While Shannon explains that she would like to find a partner with whom she could cohabit, she actually seems to be more focused on the idea that
cohabiting with other people around her age could provide her with the emotional support she desires. However, like many participants, she expresses her belief that the cohabiting couple or family are the only viable alternatives to living alone. Rex shares his thoughts on this issue:

I have a certain level of frustration that [people who live alone] don’t get a valid choice and that living arrangements are very much for the nuclear family. The couple and the kids. There might be slightly smaller versions of that in the city areas in terms of dwellings but the principle is still the same. So I guess my feeling is that I’m quite frustrated that we don’t explore other ways of living. So that we’ve got the benefit of living alone, in our own space, but also the benefit of community (Rex).

While Shannon typically blames herself for her failure to fit in with customary living arrangements, Rex offers a competing explanation for why people who live alone experience alterity. His ideas bring attention to how the spatial structure of the domestic realm perpetuates taken for granted expectations or ‘principles’ about how people should live with other people. Rather than blaming himself for his failure to fit in, Rex points to the way it is incumbent upon solo living individuals to deal with structural exclusion. In this way, participants’ competing explanations for why people who live alone do not fit in with the norm, the contradictions between their own experiences and assumptions about solo living, and their prevalent ambivalence which emphasises how they negotiate these taken for granted expectations, constitute a productive site for challenging the overriding discourse. Connidis and McMullin (2002) propose that ambivalence created at the intersection between social structure and individual agency provides a foundation for social action, which may either replicate the social order or initiate change to current structural arrangements (Connidis and McMullin, 2002: 559). Respondents’ with more ability to critically evaluate the discourse tend be those who agitate for
change. For instance, just as Rex is wanting to ‘explore other ways of living’, Lucy and her friends are planning an alternative approach to elderly life:

If I’m still around and kicking at sixty-five I wouldn’t be at all be surprised if I was living on my own. Yeah I don’t have a problem with that. My friends and I have spoken for ever, I mean it’s just getting more real now, about, you know, sort of having a rock’n’roll retirement home when we get older. By selling off our independent properties and pooling our resources to get a cook and a nurse. Whether that actually happens or not, I don’t know, but that’s our plan. So I could possibly see myself sharing with friends in the future, but that would be more due to needs than anything. Like, if we’re getting older and we’re less able to look after ourselves. Yeah it would be a good time to think about getting together and living together (Lucy).

As it is for Lucy, many respondents experience the idea of the future itself is as an abstract possibility, and the idea of maintaining solo living into it, even more so. Some respondents hope not to be living alone at the age of sixty-five, but more frequently they imagine it to be probable, likely, possible, or far less often, definite and/or preferable. Participants respond to the idea of living alone at sixty-five by imagining it as either pleasurable, manageable, or threatening, and aside from the few participants who do not intend to maintain solo living into the future, and the small minority who clearly intend to maintain it, the vast majority simultaneously imagine a future of most probably living alone while remaining ‘open to possibilities’ for future cohabitation. While, as I have shown, this is an effective means of managing ambivalence, it also suggests that solo living can provide an avenue for people to conceptually travel through life on an uncommitted path that leaves options and choices open. This demonstrates that the ambivalence created by the dialectical tension between structured social relations that problematise solo living and individual agencies is ongoing. This position of ongoing ambivalence enables people to challenge stereotypes and stigma about solo living, as well as challenge the dominant idea that a cohabiting family or partner can provide
insurance against risks and fears about ageing and mortality. As I have shown, successfully balancing the symbolic concept of future loneliness is a difficult and ongoing task. To some extent striking this balance is also dependent upon socio-economic status. The optimism expressed by some respondents regarding the reliability of the private health system to address the difficulties associated with solo living in older age, strikes a notable contrast with the fears associated with the services available to disability pensioners described by others. Nevertheless, reflecting the characteristic anxiety of the middle-class, with the exception of those with experience of longitudinal health concerns, participants within the middle-income brackets describe more concern about the future of solo living than either those in higher or lower income brackets typically do.

**Summary**

In this chapter I have argued that the solo living experience is a far more complex, multifaceted, and contradictory story than the simple correlation often made between loneliness and living alone. The taken for granted symbolic links between loneliness and solo living, or loneliness and ageing, constitute a distinct site of ambivalence. To construct and maintain positive presentations of solo living against the dominant assumptions about living alone, respondents build complex frameworks of balances. These frameworks vary depending on individual lived experience and can involve balancing loneliness and valued solitude, depression against independence, and the uncertainties of the future against the ability to choose in the now. The effectiveness of these constructions is mediated by the extent to which respondents are able to critically evaluate the contradictions in the dominant discourse. Respondents who are able to critically evaluate the
contradictions in the discourse are less likely to blame themselves for not fitting in with the norm and less likely to perceive their own experiences through the lens viewing solo living as a lonely and less than ideal way to live. Even so, like those with less capacity to present solo living in a positive light, they are equally obliged to negotiate the contradictions between the dominant discourse and their own personal experiences, and it is here that ambivalence is located. Those without the means to make such a critical evaluation are more likely to fuse their own experiences with the dominant discourse as well as blame themselves for those experiences. Throughout this chapter I have argued that the neoliberal moral edict, disseminated via the ideologies of enterprise, choice, intimacy, positive thinking, and marriage and family, and the neoliberal problematisation of the low birth rate and the ageing population, effectively merge to morally stigmatise not only solo living at an age where it is expected that people should be procreating, but also personal difficulties such as loneliness, poverty, or mental health issues such as depression. Thus the moral aspersions implicit within the taken for granted correlations between solo living and loneliness, and loneliness and depression, provide a problematic subject position for participants who actually experience loneliness or depression. The impact of this on the lived experience of participants who have less capital and therefore less means of counterbalancing stigma, is considerable, and some experience ambivalent and anxious alterity as a result. The prevailing ambivalence around the issues of loneliness and the future of solo living simultaneously facilitates resistance to the range of assumptions and structures supporting the dominant understanding that people should live with other people.
Conclusion

Introduction

Throughout this thesis I have argued that the neoliberal discourse of choice, and the stigma linked with solo living provide the two overriding and contradictory dimensions which inform participants’ narrations of their experiences of living alone. I have demonstrated that this paradoxical discursive paradigm positions solo living individuals in a state of ambivalence which they perpetually attempt to resolve: between the dominant rhetoric promoting freedom and agency and the less overt, but nevertheless influential rhetoric advancing the notion that the trend towards solo living is part of the breakdown of human relationships, and thus society as we know it. I have argued that the participants’ common ambivalence also emphasises how they negotiate the contradictions between various sets of assumptions about living alone, and their own solo living experience. I have demonstrated that the ambivalence is moderated by respondents’ capacities to present themselves in socially approved and favourable ways. I have argued that this provides insight into how the privileging of both the institution of marriage and family, and high socio-economic status, combine to restrict agency to achieve a sense of unqualified social value as a solo living individual.

Theoretical Implications

In Chapter One I discussed the theories that have been linked with the trend towards solo living which broadly fall into two schools of thought exemplified by either Zygmunt Bauman’s (2000, 2001, 2003, 2005) theory of ‘liquid modernity’ or
Anthony Giddens’ (1992) theory of ‘the transformation of intimacy’. To briefly recap firstly on Bauman’s ideas about the social impact of the contradiction between neoliberal free-market logic and the ideal of long-term commitments, Bauman argues that an individualised, deregulated and fragmented social world promotes the idealisation of love and long-term commitments and simultaneously produces cultural norms, such as a fascination with consumption and disposability, which undermine the inception and survival of love and long-term commitments. Nevertheless, people generally desire, or enter into, long-term commitment, which renders intimate relationships, in Bauman’s view, the most problematic embodiment of the prevailing ambivalence of the contemporary social world (Bauman, 2003: 6).

Throughout my analysis I have found that consistent with Bauman’s propositions, there is a marked infiltration of neoliberal principles of the workplace and marketplace into the personal sphere. This is evident in the high value that participants place on flexibility and freedom in their personal lives, their anxieties about choice, their common idealisation of, and/or disregard for, coupled partnerships, and their concerns about the risks that they see to be involved in long-term commitments. Neoliberal logic thus manifests in the private realm in a common conflicted, ambivalent, and non-committal attitude, not only to solo living, but to personal life in general. I have argued that the acute awareness of the risks associated with entering into coupled partnerships, share-housing arrangements, and community or volunteering organisations, is not extended to the workplace where the majority of respondents either value the permanent positions they occupy or desire to secure permanent and stable employment in the future. This suggests that as Bauman proposes, because of its emphasis upon investments and risks which are
insured and guaranteed, neoliberal logic can conflict with the development of close human relationships (Bauman, 2003: 7).

Bauman argues that although people who enjoy high incomes are at a distinct advantage in the neoliberal social environment, they are nevertheless subject to the generalised anxiety associated with the requirement for constant change (Bauman, 2005: 2). My analysis corresponds with Bauman’s proposition in that people on high incomes in high status fields are at a distinct advantage when compared to those who are in the middle or low socio-economic brackets, but my analysis differs from Bauman’s in that the high-status participants in this study do not generally articulate the anxiety he predicts. On the whole, except for those would like to live with a cohabiting partner and are finding that difficult to establish, respondents with high socio-economic status are exceptionally content with their solo living circumstances. As I have shown, most often they are positioned in long-term employment, own their own homes, describe living alone as their first preference and choice, have no real aspiration to enter into a cohabiting partnership and plan to continue living alone into the future. By pointing to the ways that the ubiquitous discourse of positive thinking frames ‘successful’ people with quasi-religious virtue, Barbara Ehrenreich’s (2009) argument which I discussed in Chapters One and Nine, provides insight into why this group of participants may not describe the anxiety anticipated by Bauman and which is so common to many of the other participants.

The Neoliberal Moral Crusade

Throughout this thesis I have argued that the moral prescriptions of neoliberalism operate through a framework of several interconnected ideologies. These include the popular philosophy of positive thinking which Barbara Ehrenreich (2009) argues is
Conclusion

a secular version of Calvinist religious discourse that attributes inequality and disadvantage to individuals’ ‘negative’ attitudes (Ehrenreich, 2009: 90). Ehrenreich illustrates the relationship between neoliberalism and religion by bringing attention to the dominant reverence for individual success within a number of popular evangelical movements which supplant religious goals about doing good deeds for less privileged people, with ideas about individual rewards for individual contact and relationship with God (Ehrenreich, 2009: 123). In Chapter One I also discussed Richard Sennett’s (1986) identification of another essential element of secular-religious discourse central to the neoliberal social model. Sennett proposes that today’s dominant “intimacy ideology” diverts attention from political structures onto personal selves and fosters a society in which love and intimacy have become sacred and the primary source of identity (Sennett, 1986, 259). Sennett’s ideas about the privileging of intimacy link with, and compound, the “ideology of marriage and family”, which promotes the case that cohabiting in family groups is the one truly respectable, moral and socially responsible path (DePaulo and Morris, 2005). Further elements of the secular-religiosity of neoliberalism are the discourse of ‘enterprise’, which cultivates the perception that people are individually and morally responsible for their own welfare, and that marginalised people or groups are irresponsible and thus immoral (du Gay, 1997). The discourse of choice further encourages people to believe that individuals choose their place in the social structure, and pressures individuals to blame themselves for their exploitation, oppression and other forms of disadvantage (Scambler, 2007; Salecl, 2010). Combined, these various strands of embedded moralism suggest that while neoliberalism thrives on secularism, it has a fundamentally religious or moral element which wields considerable power. The power invested in the neoliberal secular-religiosity may award people who enjoy high socio-economic status with automatic access to a socially approved identification. This may in turn pay symbolic dividends and ameliorate the perpetual self-examination, self-blame, and self-justification that the moral discourse requires of the many other participants who are grappling with it. In other words, the way neoliberal rhetoric is used by political parties and other stakeholders in policy and political debates as a means to promote the needs of one group over others can lead to those seen to have made ‘the wrong choices’ experiencing greater levels of anxiety and ambivalence in about their single and/or solo living status.
**Further Theoretical Implications**

So, while Bauman’s image of an atomised, ambivalent, and discontented contemporary social experience is certainly reflected in the stories of respondents who are at an economic or social disadvantage, almost the opposite is true of those who enjoy economic and social advantage. Bauman writes his theories on liquid modernity in contrast to a previous era with an overtone of regret about what has been lost, yet my thesis demonstrates that the outcomes of the generalised ambivalence that he has identified are perhaps not as inexorable as he suggests. I will return to a discussion of ambivalence below, but for now mention that consistent with Bauman’s theories, social conditions such as common geographic mobility for employment, and the paradox of committing to partnership while identifying as an independently choosing individual, do seem to play a role in the difficulties that people describe in finding a cohabiting partner. However, I have also found that solo living is a more complex and contradictory story than the lamentable breakdown of long-term communities and personal relationships.

Taking Bauman’s work to one of its logical conclusions, Franklin (2009) ends his article ‘On Loneliness’ with the idea that the human bond has outlived its usefulness:

> It is most likely that the bond has gone forever, past its usefulness as just another artefact of human evolution; belonging to one but not all phases of our social history (Franklin, 2009: 352).

Franklin’s suggestion, stemming from his claim that loneliness is currently at historically unprecedented levels, also points to Beck’s (1992) argument that contemporary market interests drive the move towards individualisation and the one-person household. Adding weight to this line of thought, Chapman (2004) has
demonstrated that in contemporary market economies, an industry catering to the solo living demographic is expanding and increasingly profitable. Given the current priority enjoyed by free-market enterprise, the replacement of social bonds with social atomisation is perhaps, as Franklin suggests, one potentially burgeoning ‘phase of social history’, however, my research suggests that the finality and ubiquity of his conclusion is debatable. I have demonstrated that as most people tend to do, solo living individuals largely narrate themselves through experiences of intimacy with others. Across the spectrum, from those who have very strong networks of support, to those that are relatively isolated, interpersonal connections with colleagues, friends, families, virtual connections, neighbours and pets are central within the stories that respondents tell. None of them are without bonds or the desire for bonds in the way that Franklin predicts. The scope of this thesis does not allow me to speculate on the predominance of loneliness in the wider community as proposed by Bauman and Franklin, but many of the individuals I interviewed challenge the idea that in the absence of a cohabiting sexual relationship, life is necessarily a sad and lonely experience. This finding is at odds with research indicating that people who live alone are twice as likely to be lonely as people who live with others (Baker, 2012). Many of the respondents in this study suggest that although ambivalence is an element of living their lives without a cohabiting sexual partnership, they can do so without experiencing abject loneliness.

All of the people who participated in this study maintain varying degrees of social connection and they do this predominantly within either the intimate circle of family and close friends, or the workplace. Consistent with Markus’ (2008) work on the
breakdown of the public realm, which I referred to in Chapter Eight, the participants report that community connections are relatively uncommon. Markus argues the contemporary social environment is marked by a reduction in communication between community members, and heightened expectations of securing personal fulfilment through intimate relationships. She links this to the colonisation of the public arena by private matters. This study provides a further level of complexity to the position outlined by Markus by suggesting that the extent to which people are socially connected is influenced by socio-economic status, as socially disadvantaged participants are invariably less socially connected than those who are socially advantaged. Following Markus’ line of thought about the increasing expectations placed upon intimate relationships, it is possible that the centrality of sexual imagery and discourse in the public realm, and the pseudo-sacred status and idealistic expectation of intimacy, can be linked to the discourse advancing the notion that conventional approaches to intimacy have been substituted by new and liberated practices.

As I mentioned above, in Chapter One I discussed Giddens’ (1992) theory of the ‘transformation of intimacy’ which he also links to the move towards solo living. In sum, theorists drawing on Giddens’ ideas in this area propose that the move towards one-person households is part of the breakdown of traditional social constraints on gender and sexuality, which provide a space for more equal and democratic sexual partnerships to be enacted. Through my analysis I have found that Giddens has possibly both overestimated the centrality of sex in people’s real lives, and also overlooked the power of conservative hetronormativity. He thus underestimates the constraints around which sexual relationships can be formed and be socially
approved. Despite the current liberal rhetoric around sexuality, and the visibility of sexual imagery and availability of pornography, only a few of the respondents reported having casual sex. In fact, on the whole, most are not having sex at all, and they do not generally experience this celibacy to be a problem. The sex that female participants do describe is relational, typically occurring within the bounds of friendships or partnerships, and the men report either using pornography alone or not having sex. In following Giddens’ then, who places sexuality at the centre of his claims about new freedoms, it could be anticipated that solo living individuals would be celebrating, or at least mentioning, active sexual lives, but that is not the case. In considering why this might be so, I have argued that overtly liberal cultural attitudes to sexual behaviour appear to mask a contradictory conservative reality which restricts the way socially acceptable sexual partnerships can be formed and openly discussed. This may in part explain the high incidence of reported sexual abstinence among participants and also play a role in their notable de-prioritising of sexual relationships. It should be noted that because the respondents of this study are aged between thirty and fifty-five, my findings are specifically applicable to this age group. It may be that the sexual and social sanctions they encounter are particularly acute because they are currently in the ‘life stage’ where people are expected to marry and have children. It is possible that people under the age of thirty do not feel constrained by the sexual and social sanctions I have outlined and may well experience the liberations from sexual and social norms that Giddens’ theorises. Furthermore, people over the age of fifty-five, who are past their reproductive years, may also feel less sexually constrained than the age group I interviewed.
This thesis is framed by a question about how people who live alone construct intimacy, and I have found that human connection is central to respondents’ constructions of self, but sexual intimacy, for the most part, is not of primary importance. Sex, therefore, is by no means central in respondents’ lives, and when it is, it tends to be the conventional coupled sex, or a version thereof, which is practiced or desired. So while respondents subscribe to the liberal rhetoric about sexuality, they experience a far more conservative reality. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule. In Chapter Six I introduced Jessie who describes herself as a hoarder involved in a ‘trisexual’ relationship who clearly asserts a hatred of children and who has no interest in career. Jessie is exceptional in her bold rejection of all of these social norms. In Chapter Six, again drawing from Jessie’s story, I argued that sexuality could be central to contemporary power because while many participants consider themselves to be somewhat unconventional, it is a very small minority who describe taking an unconventional approach into the sexual realm. It could be that the new freedoms from traditional sexual norms that are theorised by Giddens, are more likely to be embodied by people who identify as other than sexually ‘normal’. However, in Chapter Six I also discussed Joanne, a transgender woman who is integrated into the GLBT community and who presumably does not think of herself as sexually ‘normal’ either. Joanne, however, is actively pursuing further success in the public sphere, and as most participants do, she identifies as a ‘normal’ citizen — and in the endeavour to integrate solo living with ‘normal’ status, she, like most others, experiences ambivalence. This suggests that the new sexual freedoms theorised by Giddens may be more of a fantasy or a hope than they are a lived experience in real people’s lives.
Stigma, Neoliberalism and Solo Living

The dominant ambivalence in the respondents’ stories emphasises stigma. At one level, in a (neo-Calvinist) victim blaming polity, the stigma associated with being a victim of circumstance overshadows any potential stigma stemming from individual disabilities or lifestyles, and as a result, there is a surface-level social acceptance of difference and alternative lifestyle choices. At a deeper level, however, the stigma associated with victims and the stigmas associated with difference can be shown to have a symbiotic relationship. Today, the stigmatising of individuals who are seen to be a burden, or a potential burden, on the state, such as people who have ostensibly ‘chosen’ to be unemployed, ‘boat people’, smokers, or those who are overweight, are deliberately targeted for their ‘choices’ in public stigmatising campaigns. Although far less overtly, solo living falls into this category of social burden. This was demonstrated to me recently when I was interviewed by a women’s magazine for an article on solo living. After submitting her article, the journalist contacted me for a second time with some extra questions from her editors. She asked, “Do you think the explosion of living solo will in time affect the birth rate? If so, in the long term how will this affect society in terms of more immigration, aged care, skills shortages, etcetera?” These questions illustrate the debates, anxieties, and fears about the future into which solo living can be drawn.

In Chapter One I referred to Ulrich Beck’s (1992) argument that the notion of risk has particular significance in the late-modern context. According to Beck, the “risk society” has changed our way of thinking about the relationship between the past and the future, and anxiety about the future itself is a dominating discourse. Previously we thought of the past as primitive and that civilisation had progressed
to a better place. However, now it is thought that the “manufactured risks” of the modernist era, as well as our current ways of living, are jeopardising the future, and future sustainability has thus become a focal point of current action. The questions that the journalist asked me reflect this generalised anxiety about current practices in relation to future sustainability. They also highlight the ways that contemporary fears associated with economic liability or threats to the future reactivate and fortify stigma about difference. The journalist’s questions also reveal that while solo living is apparently acceptable, single and/or childless individuals are problematised and implicitly stigmatised as potentially burdensome. This dynamic is emphasised in the current debates about legalising same sex marriage. For example, in a recent public address, British Prime Minister David Cameron revealed:

My driving mission in politics is to build a Big Society…It starts with families. I want to make this the most family-friendly government the country has ever seen… Marriage is not just a piece of paper…it says powerful things about what we should value… I once said it shouldn't matter whether commitment was between a man and a woman, a woman and a woman, or a man and another man…it's about equality, but it's also about something else: commitment. Conservatives believe in the ties that bind us; that society is stronger when we make vows to each other and support each other. So I don't support gay marriage despite being a Conservative. I support gay marriage because I'm a Conservative (Cameron, 2011).

Subsequent to Cameron’s address, Australian Shadow Minister for Broadband and Communications and conservative MP, Malcolm Turnbull, quoted Cameron on this last point and went on to say:

There is a strong public interest in people living together and supporting and helping each other. John Howard was not thinking of gay couples when he said in 1995 “A stable functioning family provides the best welfare support system yet devised.” But the point is well made. Codependency is a good thing…Study after study has demonstrated that people are better off financially, healthier, happier if they are married and indeed, I repeat, if they are formally married as opposed to simply living together (Turnbull, 2012).
There is a certain irony in the way both Cameron and Turnbull’s championing of interdependence as being the basis of society, contradicts the neoliberal rhetoric championing independence. By simultaneously advocating and pathologising independence, neoliberal proponents are negotiating the same structural contradictions the participants are negotiating, and negotiating the ensuing ambivalence too. Regardless of this rather awkward detail, by emphatically endorsing the institution of marriage and family, both Cameron and Turnbull implicitly stigmatise solo living. Turnbull’s comment about the family being the most effective “welfare support system” clearly reveals the neoliberal program of shifting state welfare responsibilities onto the family, and the purposeful endorsement of conservative family values as articulated by both Cameron and Turnbull, is demonstrably a calculated means to this end. Further illustrating the political investment in mobilising the presumption that marriage is an obvious good, are initiatives such as the $1.5 billion project spearheaded by President George W. Bush in 2004, to promote marriage among the poor (DePaulo and Morris, 2005: 60).

Annamarie Jagose (2012) proposes that the current push to legalise same sex marriage points to the desire to extend the privileges, status and obligations associated with marriage to those who share the normative values of long-term, monogamous cohabitation, which further alienates and disadvantages people who do not share a similar lifestyle or value system. By bringing gay and lesbian couples into the normative fold, for instance, polygamists, polyamorists, single people, and people who live alone are further consigned to the margins. Marriage and family are thus foundational to the neoliberal agenda, which may be advanced by the combination of the quasi-sacred status of intimacy and the dominant
visibility of sexuality. The pseudo-sacred status of intimacy and the centrality of sexuality in the public realm foster the belief that intimacy is a moral issue and people ‘should’ be having sex. Capitalising on this discourse, marketing campaigns promoting pharmaceutical products aimed at providing or restoring a ‘normal’ sexual functioning have become a dominant aspect of the advertising landscape. When combined with the contemporary sanctions around having casual sex which, as I argued in Chapter Six, appear to be informed by a rigid conceptual dichotomy between casual sex and sex within coupled relationships, the emphasis on intimacy and the centrality of sexuality work to reinforce the imperative to conform with the normative modes of coupling endorsed by political figures such as Cameron and Turnbull. In this way, the dominant focus on intimacy and the high visibility of sexuality can be seen as central elements of neoliberal power.

The power exercised through the combination of the emphasis on intimacy and the high visibility of sexuality is evidenced in this study by the fact that the couple is overwhelmingly the dominant point of reference in all of the respondents’ narratives. Although the people I interviewed do not want to, or have not managed to, achieve the coupled ideal, by setting up their experiences in contrast to this ideal, or by constructing narratives to neutralise its absence, they demonstrate that the dominance of the idealised couple remains hegemonic. This implies that contrary to Giddens’ notion of the self-actualised sexual being, neoliberal power works to restrict and restrain individuals’ agency to move beyond the couple, and the sexuality he places at the centre of his claims about new individual freedoms, may actually contribute to neoliberal power. I illustrated this in Chapters Four and Six where I showed that people who live alone are viewed with suspicion about whether
they are sexually ‘normal’ and ‘safe’. This concern about the sexuality of those living alone underpins the most overt stigmatising that they encounter.

Neoliberal rhetoric celebrates difference but is not actually more accommodating of it, and the dynamic of quasi-acceptance creates tension for respondents. They feel frustration about being left out of political incentives and policies aimed at ‘working families’ which ignore the solo living demographic. The implication of this exclusion is that living alone is not as good or worthy as living in a family group, which further highlights the dominance of the institution of marriage and family. Because most respondents do not have children, they are required to continually negotiate a position in relation to the implicit problematisation of solo living within the debates about the low birth rate and its projected ‘negative’ future outcomes such as an ageing population and increased immigration. Consequently, while participants invariably subscribe to the dominant discourse about the merit of the autonomous self-making individual, at the same time, (unless, like Jessie, they do not imagine themselves to be ‘normal’) they articulate a common struggle to achieve success within this paradigm. So even though many respondents are successfully self-directed, autonomous and independent individuals, because most of them either do not aspire to achieve, or have not managed to achieve, the coupled partnership, they are bound to a continual process of recuperation. Many respondents are thus confronted by the possibility of mutually exclusive courses of action, and in choosing between them, they experience ambivalence.
Ambivalence

In Chapter One I discussed Connidis and McMullin’s argument that ambivalence can be understood as “structurally created contradictions that are made manifest in interaction” (Connidis and McMullin, 2002: 558). Throughout this thesis I have drawn on the sociological concept of ambivalence to link the ambivalence and conflict described by the respondents to the inherent contradictions of neoliberalism. The tension between the two dominant ideas 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, is a consistent source of ambivalence. Furthermore, ambivalence is also produced by the contradictions between taken for granted suppositions about the experience of living alone and the lived experiences of participants.

Respondents who are of high socio-economic status or who describe solo living as their first preference achieve an effective means of managing the ambivalence described above. However, there are also other means of doing so. To some extent, for respondents who are not in the highest socio-economic bracket, restoration is a gendered issue. In Chapter Seven I argued that although motherhood is at the top of the socially approved female success hierarchy, female participants who are not mothers can compensate for their childlessness by citing other social successes such as careers, property investment, or by sustaining loving relationships with extended family members or friends. With career at the top of the socially approved male success hierarchy, however, male respondents who do not have especially successful careers have no equivalent way to recover from the combined effect of that failure and their solo living. Even if they are fathers, the status of father, unlike
that of mother, does not provide a means for men to recuperate from unsatisfactory or low status employment. Therefore, within the middle-income brackets, men have less opportunity for restoration than women. This is consistent with, and adds insight into, Flood’s (2005) findings that women who live alone do not report significantly more or less loneliness than their married counterparts, but men who live alone are the loneliest Australian citizens (Flood: 2005: 36). As is the case with the respondents with high socio-economic status, there is no marked gender difference in respondents who are experiencing poverty or unemployment. However, both men and women with low socio-economic status often have limited means to resolve the tension and can thus both experience living alone as an isolated, anxious reality.

Throughout this thesis I have argued that while those participants’ of lower socio-economic statuses have fewer options from which to manage the process of restoration, social success does not provide an absolute exemption from the dynamic. Even if respondents are well equipped to manage ambivalence, it still has to be managed, and is therefore, in effect, an ever present and irresolvable fact of life. For some participants, this conflict is articulated in nothing more than the odd contradictory statement, or by drawing contrasts between their own satisfaction with solo living and the dissatisfaction of their married friends, but for others, the conflict can be a distressing source of anxiety, which as I demonstrated in Chapter Nine, is often accompanied by depression.
Anxiety and Choice

In Chapter Nine I emphasised the state of permanent uncertainty and conflict described by many participants that is consistent with Renata Salecl’s (2003; 2008; 2010) reflections about a link between the dominant consumer discourse of choice and the proliferation of anxiety and anxiety related disorders in contemporary society. To briefly recap, Salecl argues that the high level of anxiety that many people are currently experiencing is linked to today’s consumer discourse which invites us to believe that rather than being ourselves we are continually becoming a self — which is an anxious work in progress. This dynamic resonates with participants because in a couple-normative environment, although acceptable as a state of becoming, solo living is not accepted as a legitimate ongoing state of being. When solo living is framed as a transitory period between cohabiting coupled partnerships, it does not challenge the institution of marriage and family, but as a state of being in itself, it presents a considerable affront. Solo living is therefore often represented and experienced as a space that allows one to be always poised for the next opportunity, and willing to relinquish what exists in the now. Some people who live alone may therefore have a heightened experience of the generalised anxiety associated with the suspended state of becoming that Salecl identifies.

Salecl argues that a key problem with discourse of choice is that choice is not an individual but a social issue. She illustrates the social dimensions of choice by drawing attention to the amount of money and time people spend on seeking advice on how to successfully make choices which suggests that choosing is not an individual, or an easy, task. One of the ways people attempt to deal with the anxiety associated with choice is to form an identification with authority figures such as
self-help-gurus, lifestyle coaches, or medical experts, who can offer advice on how best to proceed (Salecl, 2008: 171). So while it is argued that in a late modern world, institutional morality and grand narratives have lost their authority, it can also be argued that in a late-modern world, social norms, popular discourse, and collective identification with neoliberal secular-religiosity, provide an equally dominant source of authority. It may therefore be that the flipside of the widespread disregard for institutional morality and scientific consensus, is an increased deference to social norms, values, and secular morality. If this were so, it would provide insight into how, in a social environment which apparently respects people’s freedom of choice, the institution of marriage and family retains an unquestioned and uncontested dominance, and the stigmatisation of difference remains an active and powerful tool for repressing overt dissent. Although living alone itself can be interpreted as a form of dissent, the majority of participants simultaneously respond to the implicit obligation to maintain a stake in the institution of marriage and family by framing their solo living in terms of holding out for the ideal partner, and it is a very small minority who reject the dominant discourse altogether.

The Solo Living/Normal Dichotomy

Despite respondents’ common subscription to the institution of marriage and family, whether or not they hope to establish conjugal couples is not an especially significant driver of the continual jockeying for a position where they feel confirmed, affirmed and valued. Neither is it a dominant element of the continual process of restoration that they are engaged in. Many people enjoy solo living, but find that in a couple-normative environment, connecting with others while living
alone requires continual effort. Although at times the effort can be arduous, at other times it is welcome, enjoyable and energising. Respondents frequently acknowledge that they would be unlikely to put equivalent effort into broader relationships if they were living with a partner, and they would feel the poorer for it. The prevailing ambivalence may thus be less a product of the paradoxical necessity to be a coupled partner and be independent and in control, and more the result of the desire to have the freedom to live alone and be accepted and valued as a ‘normal’ citizen.

While the freedom to live alone and be accepted as normal is more or less readily accessible to people with high socio-economic status, people who do not enjoy high incomes and high status do not have equal access to the freedoms to be self-actualising in the way the neoliberal rhetoric promises. Those without high socio-economic status are thus driven to secure social acceptance by subscribing to the ideology of marriage and family. I cannot know how many participants would, given the opportunity, unburden themselves of the ideal and how many would realise it, but I suspect that some of the people I interviewed would have a less ambivalent and more content experience of solo living if the opportunity to live outside the bounds of marriage and family and be accepted as normal was available to them.

This thesis therefore contradicts and challenges the accepted wisdom regarding the autonomous independence of the choosing individual by suggesting that success within the neoliberal framework depends upon the subject exercising their ‘free’ choices within the normative parameters of either socio-economic success or the
institution of marriage and family. Highlighting the cultural hegemony of marriage and family and the ways in which it is reproduced in the lived experiences of people who live alone, this thesis also provides insight into the implicit means by which the hegemony of marriage and family is sustained and couched within popular/neoliberal discourse. The more subtle forms of control and manipulation within the innate meanings of the discourse are revealed in the gaps, silences and absences which render solo living somewhat invisible in a country where approximately one in four households is inhabited by someone who lives alone (ABS, 2012). As Klinenberg argues, despite its prevalence, living alone is one of the least discussed and consequently most poorly understood issues of our time (Klinenberg, 2012: 6).

This lack of public and political representation provided the motivation for both myself and the participants to take our respective parts in this study. It is therefore my hope that this thesis will contribute to a public conversation about living alone. By challenging the strategic alignments between the institutions, knowledge, and practices involved with the perpetuation of the hegemony of marriage and family, and the suppression of alternate subjectivities, a public conversation about solo living could bring to light the complicity of discursive systems with the social structures operating to render solo living other than ‘normal’. Because contending with ambivalence requires taking action, the ongoing attempts of solo living individuals to attain resolution by articulating the clash between their own views and social norms, and by using humour to resolve the ambivalence, respondents are already challenging and contesting the power of the largely uncontested hegemony of marriage and family. The creativity they use to form the varied types of intimate
relationships they sustain illustrates that although constrained by the social structure, solo living individuals are acting with agency to challenge those structures and norms that position living alone as being outside of normative bounds.

**Limitations and Future Directions**

This study has provided a depth of insight into the lived experience of predominantly Anglo, predominantly heterosexual, solo living Australian individuals aged between thirty and fifty-five. This thesis identifies structural paradoxes that intersect in the lives of solo living individuals, and shows how they manifest in a common experience of ambivalence. This thesis also sheds light upon the contemporary gendered and class mediated operation of stigma. It raises the opportunity for similar work with people who are in some way already marginalised or stigmatised including gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. Future studies could benefit from making a direct call to non-heterosexual people who live alone, as this could help to further understand the relationship between sexuality, stigma and solo living. This study also opens up further research avenues for investigation into the extent to which childless or defacto couples or sole parents, for example, also struggle to restore their status. It raises questions about how people who find themselves at the intersection of other structural contradictions — such as that between the idea that Australia is a multicultural society, and entrenched racism — experience and manage the ensuing ambivalence. Because I relied on a self-selected sample to conduct this study, it is not possible to know whether the data is representative of the general population of solo living individuals. However, by analysing both the manifest content of the text and the underlying values of popular and entrenched discourse within it, I have emphasised
the way subjectivity is produced in discourse. As Foucault (1978) argues, while discourse transmits, produces, and reinforces power, it also exposes and undermines it. Thus, by exposing the power that stigmatises solo living, this thesis contributes to the promotion of resistance to forms of control, and enables new types of subjectivities.
Bibliography

http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Lookup/3236.0Main+Features12001%20to%202026, [viewed 20th February 2008].

—— 2009, *Living Alone*, Australian Social Trends,

—— 2011, *3310.0 - Marriages and Divorces, Australia, 2010*,

—— 2012, *2011 Census QuickStats*,


Franklin, A. and Tranter, B., 2008, Loneliness in Australia, Paper No. 13, Housing and Community Research Unit, School of Sociology and Social Work, University of Tasmania.


## Summary of Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Employment/Income Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adele</td>
<td>Mid 40s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>High income professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anais</td>
<td>Mid 30s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>High income professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Mid 30s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Lower-middle income professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bella</td>
<td>Mid 40s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Middle income public servant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brett</td>
<td>Mid 40s</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Lower-middle income administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlie</td>
<td>Late 40s</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Lower-middle income sales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claude</td>
<td>Late 30s</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Higher-middle income public servant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dave</td>
<td>Mid 40s</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Higher-middle income professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drew</td>
<td>Late 30s</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Lower-middle income professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred</td>
<td>Early 50s</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Lower-middle income casual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grace</td>
<td>Mid 30s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Lower-middle income casual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holly</td>
<td>Late 40s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Low income unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ivy</td>
<td>Early 50s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>High income professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jasmine</td>
<td>Late 30s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Higher-middle income administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jen</td>
<td>Early 50s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Middle income administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jessie</td>
<td>Mid 40s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Middle income administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanne</td>
<td>Late 40s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Higher-middle income professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joel</td>
<td>Late 30s</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Low income student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh</td>
<td>Late 40s</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Middle income trades</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julia</td>
<td>Early 40s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>High income tradesperson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>Early 30s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Middle income administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>Late 30s</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Middle income sales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liam</td>
<td>Early 30s</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Middle income industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lola</td>
<td>Late 30s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Higher-middle income professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>Mid 40s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Middle income professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luke</td>
<td>Late 40s</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Middle income administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max</td>
<td>Early 50s</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Lower-middle income disability pensioner/student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mick</td>
<td>Mid 40s</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Middle income professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pam</td>
<td>Mid 40s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Middle income administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rex</td>
<td>Early 50s</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>High income professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rourke</td>
<td>Mid 40s</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>High income professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
<td>Mid 40s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Middle income professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shannon</td>
<td>Early 30s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Lower-middle income industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td>Early 40s</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Middle income industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonny</td>
<td>Late 40s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Middle income professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thia</td>
<td>Early 50s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Low income disability pensioner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>Late 40s</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>High income professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracey</td>
<td>Early 30s</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Higher-middle income administrator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wal</td>
<td>Early 50s</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>High income professional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wes</td>
<td>Mid 30s</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>High income industry</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Bios

Adele is a high-achieving professional in her mid-forties and began living alone fifteen years ago after sharing housing with friends. She is in a high-income bracket, has always lived in Adelaide, and owns her home in an inner city area. Adele spends around four nights a week at home alone, is estranged from her surviving family members, and has two people she considers as close friends then a strong network of associates and community ties. She chooses living alone as her first preference and would like to continue doing so for the rest of her life.

Anais is a professional in her mid-thirties and has lived alone for five years following a series of share housing arrangements. Anais moved to Adelaide from interstate for work and although geographically distant, she is close to her family and includes them in them in five or six people she feels close to. She rents the unit she lives in, and owns a home interstate where she plans to return. Anais is usually at home alone seven nights a week, and spends the majority of her social time on the phone. She would like to find a cohabiting partnership in the future and chooses living alone until she does so.

Anna is a professional in her mid-thirties and has lived alone for fifteen years. Born overseas, she has lived and worked in a variety of world cities and maintains contact with her family via phone and holiday visits. Anna has a large network of social connections, with whom she spends around twenty or more hours a week, and is rarely home at night alone. Anna owns her home and is currently earning a low-middle income. She feels that her solo living is both circumstantial and her first choice and she imagines possibilities that may include cohabitation with a future partner.

Bella is a public servant in her mid-forties and has lived alone for approximately thirteen years following a divorce from a decade long marriage from which she has an adult daughter. She is on a middle income and owns her own home. Bella was born and raised in Adelaide where she has remained and is semi-estranged from her family. Bella has two people she feels close to and with whom she spends two or three hours and week and tends to be at home alone for seven nights of the week. Bella feels unsure about whether living alone is her choice, and she is open to the possibility of meeting a cohabiting partner.

Brett works in administration, is in his mid-forties, and has lived alone for seven years following a six-year cohabiting partnership. Brett generally spends every night at home alone with the exception of one night a fortnight when his stepdaughter stays with him. He maintains a close relationship with his mother and does not have anyone he considers as a close friend. On a lower-middle income, Brett rents a home in an outer suburban area, has always lived in Adelaide, and spends around ten hours a week with associates in his sporting club and his family. Brett feels unsure about whether living alone is his choice, and would like to form a cohabiting partnership in the future.

Charlie is in his late-forties and earns a lower-middle income in sales and rents the home he lives in. When younger he shared housing with friends and has now lived
alone for eighteen years. Charlie has moved around regional South Australia for work and is geographically distant from his family with whom he maintains telephone and holiday contact. He has two people he considers as close connections but from whom he is geographically separated and he spends two or three hours a week with people outside his workplace. He chooses living alone and would like to form a cohabiting partnership as soon as possible.

**Claude** is a public servant in his late-thirties and has lived alone for approximately ten years. Having lived and worked interstate where he shared housing with friends, he now lives in Adelaide where he was raised and his family still reside. Claude is at home alone approximately six nights a week and spends a few hours a week with his family and with his mates at the pub or the footy. The two people he considers as close friends are geographically distant and he maintains an hour or two a week contact with them on the phone. Claude is on a higher-middle income and owns his own home. He chooses living alone as his first preference and expects to maintain it into his old age.

**Dave** is a high achieving professional in his mid-forties and has lived alone for approximately fifteen years. Prior to this he shared housing intermittently with stretches of solo living. Dave usually spends around four or five nights at home alone. Having moved to Adelaide from interstate for his work, he is emotionally close but geographically distant from his family and the two people he considers to be close friends. Dave owns his home and has recently become involved in a relationship that he hopes will become a cohabiting partnership in the future. Dave feels that living alone is both choice and circumstance and would like to cohabit with a partner as soon as possible.

**Drew** is in his late-thirties and has lived alone for three years following a series of share housing arrangements. As a postgraduate student he is on a middle-low income and rents a house. With no surviving immediate family, Drew has five or six people he considers to be close friends and a wider interactive social network with whom he spends a few hours a week. Drew has always been based in Adelaide and spends roughly five or six nights at home alone. He chooses living alone as his first preference and is open to future possibilities for cohabitation.

**Fred** is in his early-fifties and has lived alone in Adelaide since moving from his family home twenty-seven years ago. He is on a lower income after having retired from a long-term public service position and owns his home. Fred does not have anyone he considers to be a close friend and is at home alone seven nights a week. He has a limited connection with his family who he sees for Christmas and other special occasions and spends a few hours a week with a recreational group. Fred feels that living alone is circumstantial and although he would like to cohabit with a partner, he expects to maintain solo living into old age.

**Ivy** is a professional in her early-fifties and has lived alone for five years following a thirty-year marriage from which she has two adult children. In a high-income bracket, she also owns her home. Ivy has four or five people she considers to be close connections and with whom she spends around twelve hours a week, and a strong network of collegial ties. She has close connections with her family whom she sees on a weekly basis, and is at home alone for around six or seven nights a
week. She chooses living alone as her first preference and hopes to maintain it into
the future.

**Grace** is in her mid-thirties and has lived alone for ten years after moving from her
family home. Consistently based in Adelaide, she is employed in various casual
positions, earns a lower-middle income and owns her home. Grace has a strong
connection with her family who she sees on a regular basis and four or five other
people she considers as close friends. She spends around fifteen to twenty hours a
week with people outside the workplace and four or five nights alone at home. She
chooses living alone and is open to the possibility of future cohabitation with a
partner.

**Holly** is in her late forties and has lived alone for eight years following the death of
her mother with whom she used to cohabit. Holly is unemployed and lives in state
housing in an outer suburban area. She is estranged from her remaining family and
has two people she thinks of as close friends and with whom she spends around an
hour a week. She is at home alone seven nights a week and has lived much of her
life in Adelaide. Holly sees living alone as circumstantial and would like to move
into share housing as soon as possible.

**Jasmine** is in her late-thirties and has lived alone for ten years following a house
sharing arrangement with a good friend. She is on a higher-middle income in a
long-term workplace position and rents the unit she lives in. Including family, she
has five people she feels close to and spends time with, generally on the phone, and
is usually at home alone seven nights a week. Jasmine has maintained a consistent
base in Adelaide where she was raised. She chooses living alone and would like to
form a cohabiting partnership in the future.

**Jen** is in her early-fifties and has lived alone for five years following a series of
share housing arrangements interspersed with periods of solo living. She estimates
she has lived alone for fourteen of the twenty years since her divorce from a five-
year marriage. Jen has been mobile over the course of her lifetime and is therefore
distinct from three of the four people she feels close to. She spends
time sporadically with a few friends in Adelaide and is typically at home alone six
or seven nights a week. Jen is employed in a middle-income administrative position
and rents the unit she lives in. Jen chooses living alone as her first preference and
expects to maintain it into the future.

**Jessie** is in her mid-forties and has lived alone for twenty years. Jessie has a partner
who also lives alone and they do not intend to cohabit in the future. Jessie is on a
middle income in a long-term administrative workplace position and owns her
home. Including her partner she has three people she considers as close connections
then a wider network focused around an interest group. She typically spends around
three or four nights at home alone. She maintains sparse contact with her surviving
family members and has been consistently based in Adelaide over the course of her
life. Jessie chooses living alone and expects to maintain it into the future.

**Joanne** is in her late-forties and has lived alone for six years following a seven-year
cohabiting partnership. Joanne is a professional in a higher-middle income bracket,
and rents her home. Including family members she has five people she feels close to
and with whom she spends two or three hours a week, either in person or on the
phone, and then a wider social network. After moving from overseas as a child,
Joanne has remained in Adelaide. She feels that living alone is probably her choice
and is open to the possibility of future cohabitation with a partner.

**Joel** is a student in his late-thirties and has lived alone for seven years following a
series of share housing arrangements interspersed with periods of solo living. Joel is
currently unemployed and a part-time student, on a low-income, and rents his home.
Including his father, Joel has four people he feels close to and with whom he spends
three or four hours a week, and spends around six nights at home alone. Joel has
lived and worked interstate and now resides in Adelaide where he was raised. Joel
feels unsure about whether living alone is his choice and would like to form a
cohabiting partnership in the future.

**Josh** is a tradesperson on a middle income in his late-forties and has lived alone in
the house he owns for seventeen years. Josh is geographically distant from his
family and has three people he considers to be close connections and with whom he
spends around an hour a week. Josh has remained in Adelaide since arriving from
overseas as a young adult, chooses to live alone, and would like to cohabit with a
partner in the future.

**Julia** is in her early-forties and has lived alone for six years following an eight-year
cohabiting relationship. Julia earns a high-income in the industrial sector and owns
her home. Having lived and worked interstate in the past, she now resides in
Adelaide where she was raised. She sees her one remaining family member around
five times a year and has four people she considers as close connections. She spends
around six hours a week with people outside the workplace and around six nights a
week at home alone. Julia thinks of living alone as circumstantial and is open to the
possibility of cohabiting with a partner in the future.

**Karen** is an administrator in her early-thirties and has lived alone for three years.
She was raised and has remained in Adelaide where she earns a middle-income and
owns her home. Karen has approximately twelve people she considers to be close
connections, and strong family ties. She spends around five hours a week outside of
working hours with others and is usually at home alone five nights a week. Karen
chooses living alone as her first preference and is open to the possibility of future
cohabitation with a partner.

**Kevin** in his late-thirties and has lived alone for three years after moving from his
interstate family home. Geographically distant but emotionally close, he maintains
regular contact with his family on visits and the telephone. Including family
members, Kevin feels close to six people whom he does not often see, and spends
seven nights a week alone at home. On a middle income in sales, he rents his home,
and upon completion of his current working contract, plans to return to the city in
which his family reside. Kevin chooses living alone and expects to maintain it into
the future.

**Liam** is in his early-thirties and has lived alone for five years following a series of
share housing arrangements. Raised in rural South Australia, Liam has lived and
worked interstate and now resides in Adelaide. Liam is estranged from his surviving
family members, and not having anyone he feels close to, spends very little time
with others outside the workplace. Liam is typically at home alone seven nights a
week, works in an industrial field, earns a middle income, and rents his home. Liam
feels that living alone is probably circumstantial and would like to share a home
with a partner in the future.

**Lola** is in her late-thirties and has lived alone for twelve years following a six-
month cohabitation with a friend after moving from the family home. Lola is
employed in a long-term professional position. She owns her own home and is close
with her family whom she maintains regular contact and has three people she
considers to be close friends. She spends around an hour a week with people outside
the workplace and is at home alone around six nights a week. She chooses living
alone as her first preference and is open to the possibility that she might meet
someone with whom she might like to cohabit but expects to maintain solo living
into the future.

**Lucy** is in her mid-forties and has lived alone for 10 years following a series of
share houses. Employed in a demanding and rewarding position in the public eye,
she is on a middle-income and owns her home. Lucy maintains regular contact with
her family and has five close friends with whom she spends around five hours a
week and then a broad social network. Lucy usually spends seven nights a week at
home alone and enjoys living alone, but as she is pregnant at the time of our
interview, expects her situation to soon change.

**Luke** is in his late-forties and has lived alone for ten years following sharing his
house with family members. Luke is employed in an administrative position on a
middle income, and owns his home. Luke has four people he considers close friends
and with whom he spends several hours a week, and an interactive connection with
wider social groups and family members. Luke spends four or five nights alone at
home. He feels that living alone is circumstantial and expects to maintain it into the
future.

**Max** is in his early-fifties and has lived alone for twenty-six years. A disability
pensioner, Max is also a student, employed part time, on a lower-middle income,
and rents his home. Max has two people he feels close to and with whom he spends
between fifteen minutes to an hour a week. He spends around six nights a week at
home alone and enjoys a monthly visit with his family members. Max feels that
living alone is circumstantial and would like to form a cohabiting partnership but
expects to maintain solo living into the future.

**Mick** is in his mid-forties and has lived alone for fifteen years following a series of
share housing arrangements. Mick’s living family member is estranged and he has
ten people he considers as close friends, with whom he spends more than twenty
hours a week, and broad and vast collegial and community connections. Mick is
employed in a prestigious middle-income profession and lives in a long-term rental
home. He chooses living alone as his first preference and is open to the possibility
of future cohabitation.
Pam is an administrator in her mid-forties and has lived alone for twenty-three years following cohabitation with her family. In a long-term position and on a middle income, Pam rents the unit she lives in. Pam is estranged from her remaining family members and has three people she considers to be close friends. She usually spends seven nights a week at home alone and ‘very little’ time with others outside the workplace. She chooses living alone and is open to the possibility of sharing a home with a future partner.

Rex is a professional in his early-fifties and has lived alone for ten years following a series of share housing arrangements, cohabitations with partners, and periods of solo living. Rex has an adult son from a short-term marriage approximately twenty-five years ago and maintains contact with his existing family. He has about ten people he feels close to and a wide network of collegial and social connections. He spends around fifteen hours a week with people outside of the workplace and around four nights a week at home alone. Rex earns a high-income and rents his home. He chooses living alone and is open to the possibility of future cohabitation.

Rick is in his early-fifties and has lived alone for ten years following an eight-year marriage. Employed in a long-term position in defence, he earns a high-income and rents the home he currently lives in. Rick has been very geographically mobile for his work and expects to continue moving locations in the future. He maintains contact with his family and three or four friends who live interstate and spends an hour or two a week with people outside the workplace. He is generally at home alone seven nights a week. Rick chooses living alone and is open to the possibility of future cohabitation with a partner.

Rourke is a professional in his late-forties and has lived alone for seven years following a twenty-three-year marriage. He has two children who stay with him on alternate weekends. Rourke is involved in a partnership and plans to cohabit with her in the very near future. Rourke has remained in Adelaide where he was raised, is on a high-income, and rents the home he currently lives in. Rourke has strong family connections and other than his partner has approximately six people he thinks of as close friends. He is very rarely at home alone at night and spends around ten hours a week with people other than his partner. He has chosen to live alone in the time he has done so, but does not expect to sustain it into the future.

Sara is in her mid-forties, is employed in a demanding field, and has lived alone for sixteen years. She has a long-term partner of eighteen years who also lives alone. Sara is on a middle income and owns her own home. Sara has four people she considers as close friends then a wider network of associates and collegial ties. Sara is close to her family who also live in Adelaide where she has remained since childhood, and spends around three or four nights at home alone. She chooses living alone as her first preference and expects that, due to health concerns, she will need to cohabit with her partner in old age.

Shannon is in her early-thirties and has lived alone for eleven years following a cohabitation with a partner preceded by sharing housing with friends. Shannon is employed in the tourism industry, earns a lower-middle income, and rents her home. Shannon is geographically distant from her family who she maintains contact with on the phone, and has four people she considers to be close friends. As three of her
friends live interstate, she keeps in contact by phone and spends a small amount of
time with people outside the workplace and six or seven nights a week at home
alone. She chooses living alone and is open to the possibility of sharing a home with
a future partner.

Simon is in his early-forties and has lived alone for twenty-three years following a
short period of sharing with a friend subsequent to moving from the family home.
Simon is employed in a long-term middle-income position within the hospitality
industry and owns his home. Simon nominates his sister as the only person he feels
close to and rarely spends time with people outside the workplace. He generally
spends seven nights a week at home alone. He chooses living alone and is open to
the possibility of a future cohabiting partnership.

Sonny is in her late-forties and has lived alone for ten years following a series of
geoographically dispersed share-housing arrangements. Sonny is employed in a full-
time, middle-income position and owns the home she lives in. Sonny has ten people
she considers as close friends and spends over fifteen hours a week with, and a
strong connection with her parents who are geographically distant. She typically
spends three or four nights a week at home alone. Sonny chooses living alone as her
first preference and is open to the possibility of cohabiting with a future partner.

Thia has been living alone for the past ten years following being widowed after an
eighteen-month marriage. In her early-fifties, prior to her marriage she lived in a
series of share homes interspersed with periods of living alone. Thia suffers with
long-term illness, is in receipt of a disability pension and in a low-income bracket.
Thia is alone at home seven nights a week and spends around one hour a week in
the company of the two people she considers close friends. Thia is estranged from
her family and involved in a number of voluntary pursuits. She feels that living
alone is circumstantial and would like to cohabit in the future.

Tom is a professional in his late-forties and has lived alone for ten years after
moving from the family home. A consistent resident of Adelaide since birth, he
earns a high-income and owns his house. Including family, Tom has six people he
feels close to but shares very little time with, and usually spends seven nights a
week at home alone. He chooses living alone and would like to form a cohabiting
partnership in the future.

Tracey is in her early-thirties and has lived alone for three years following a series
of share-housing arrangements. Tracey is employed in a full-time, higher-middle
income administrative position and owns the unit she lives in. Tracey is very close
to her family who are geographically distant and maintains regular contact with
visits and telephone communication with them. She has three other people she feels
close to and with whom she spends three or four hours a week with and is at home
alone around six nights a week. She chooses living alone and would like to form a
cohabiting partnership in the future.

Wal is a high achieving professional in his early-fifties and has lived alone since
moving from the family home twenty-seven years ago. Wal has lived and worked in
a number of world cities and now resides in Adelaide where he was born. He spends
five or six nights a week at home alone, earns high income, and owns his home.
Including his family, he has four people he considers as close connections and with whom he spends around four hours a week. He chooses living alone as his first preference and is open to the possibility of cohabiting with a future partner.

**Wes** is in his mid-thirties and has lived alone for six years since moving from the family home. Wes owns his home and earns a high-income in the mining industry which requires him to spend every second fortnight away from home. Wes maintains a strong connection with his parents and has two people he considers as close friends with whom he spends very little time. During his periods at home, Wes spends five or six nights at home alone and seven nights alone when away at work. He feels unsure about whether solo living is his choice and expects to maintain it into the future.