

Lonely... or alone and well?

Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone. By Eric Klinenberg, New York, NY, The Penguin Press, 2012, 266 pp., \$27.95/hardback.

Are you living the life you envisioned for yourself when you were younger? Me neither.

Although I never dreamed of a life defined solely by having a spouse, children, and a white picket fence, I did wind up with a spouse, children, and a split-rail fence. But constants exist only in physics and math, not in life. I still have the split-rail fence; however, death brought a premature end to the marriage and my oldest children have flown from the nest, leaving me in near-solo status. Looking at my neighbors with their households full of people, I feel as though I'm an anomaly. Are there really other people my age now going near-solo and even "going solo"?

Eric Klinenberg, a New York University professor of sociology, wrote *Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone* as a followup to *Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2002), his investigation of the summer 1995 deaths of seniors (many of whom lived alone). As Klinenberg points out, I am hardly alone in my status: more than 50 percent of American adults are single, and many of them live alone. Although some live alone by default, others choose living solo as the best of the options currently available to them, while yet others enthusiastically choose to live alone. Living the

life of what Klinenberg has dubbed a "singleton" has become a booming lifestyle trend, one of the most consequential sociological trends in America today.

Back in 1940, less than 8 percent of households consisted of one person living alone. Today that's true of 28 percent of all households. In fact, Klinenberg writes that people who live alone "are now tied with childless couples as the most prominent residential type—more common than the nuclear family, the multigenerational home, and the roommate or group home." According to Klinenberg, some 17 million adult women and 14 million adult men were living alone in 2010. That's 1 in 7 Americans ages 18 and older. Two-thirds are younger than 65—in many cases, much younger. Despite a recent media focus on the "boomerang generation" of young adults who return home to live with their parents after completing college, the number of young adults who live alone has been growing over the long term. Klinenberg notes that living alone, once seen as "a sign of social failure," now is viewed by young adults as "a rite of passage and a reward for success." At the other end of the age spectrum, a desire for self-reliance helps account for the growth in solo living among seniors: 1 in 3 people ages 65 and older now lives alone, compared with 1 in 10 in 1950.

Going Solo, written for a general audience, combines the use of data with ethnographic observations, interviews, and a review of international trends to create an easy-to-read book about what has been an up-till-now overlooked, yet important, sociological trend. Focusing on city dwellers, Klinenberg's research included 300 semistructured

interviews held in major metropolitan areas. Klinenberg zeroed in on four demographic groups: young adult professionals ages 28–40, middle-class adults ages 40–65, poor men ages 30–65 living in SROs—single-room occupancy buildings, in which the rooms tend to be small, have limited amenities, and are sometimes subsidized—and people ages 65 and older. (People living in nursing homes or other institutions and group settings were excluded from the study as not technically living alone.)

I found the four-group focus to be both a strength and a weakness of the book. On the one hand, the demographically broad net cast by the author ensures that singletons are not stereotyped by readers as being exclusively young or old; employed or out of work; rich or poor; or never married, divorced, or widowed. Indeed, singletons comprise people from all of those categories. On the other hand, investigating such demographically diverse groups makes the book seem a bit haphazard in its organization because the book chapters tend to have themes—for instance, "protecting the self"—rather than discuss each of the demographic groups separately.

The author provides a closeup look at some of his subjects, thus allowing us to "meet" people as more than a statistic. From those glimpses, we learn that what matters isn't whether we live alone but whether we feel alone. Moreover, Klinenberg doesn't shy away from discussing the emotional aspects of residing alone versus living in community. Despite the demonstrated growth of solo living, Klinenberg sets out to prove that "social isolation may be less pervasive than we think" and notes

that most adults who live alone are not socially isolated. Although one divorced interviewee noted, “When you live alone, there’s no compromising; I do everything I feel like doing, when I feel like doing it,” living alone, ironically, also can allow for as much if not more social interaction than is managed by many who live with others. Singletons tend to be as civic minded and socially connected as people who don’t live alone. Although living alone may once have been seen as abetting social withdrawal and reclusiveness, the growth of urbanization and communications technology, as well as more liberal attitudes toward relationships not contingent on marriage, has helped make living alone a nonsolitary—and in some cases, rather outgoing and socially involved—kind of lifestyle. What apparently makes living alone a positive experience is that it can lead to connection, perhaps even greater connection, with others.

Klinenberg doesn’t advocate living alone as a superior lifestyle, nor apparently do most of us. He notes that 90 percent of Americans who have never been married believe that someday they will be married. And

whether married or not, we all share a desire for completeness. “Finding a partner is not enough to solve the social pain of loneliness, which is a fundamental part of the human experience,” writes Klinenberg, adding that married people, just like singles, “struggle with loneliness or the feeling that they need to change something to make their lives feel more complete.”

What Klinenberg rejects, however, is the view that our social fabric is weakened by the growth of living solo. He asks, “What if, instead of indulging the social reformer’s fantasy that we would all just be better off together, we accepted the fact that living alone is a fundamental feature of modern societies and we simply did more to shield those who go solo from the main hazards of the condition?” Klinenberg claims that there exist good solutions to the practical problems of isolation, disconnection, stress, and economic insecurity that singletons may encounter. Such problems, he writes, are not cause for “vague and fuzzy proclamations—the death of the community! The collapse of civil society!—which are notoriously difficult to assess.”

The trend toward living alone is unlikely to abate, despite slowing down during times when the economy goes sour. Klinenberg attributes the growth trend to several factors, including economic prosperity and the existence of Social Security, as well as the “cult of the individual”—aided by the rising status of women, the communications revolution, mass urbanization, and increases in longevity—since the second half of the 20th century.

Klinenberg does a good job of pointing out the “going solo” trend and its pervasiveness, as well as the challenges and opportunities it presents. As I’ve experienced firsthand, we tend to flow from one marital status to another, as well as from one kind of living situation to the next, either by design or because of circumstances. Given the myriad of social implications the growth of solo living introduces, it’s now up to us to make the best of it—whether it was part of your childhood dreams or not. □

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