Shutting Down Sex

COVID-19, Sex and the Transformation of Singledom

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the transformation of singledom during the COVID-19 pandemic, scrutinising the impact of rules and regulations governing proximity, touch and sex. I focus on government responses in Australia, situating the nation's experience in a global context. National discussions were strangely sexless, presuming widespread coupledness and emphasising the lost, non-sexual intimacies of families and older people. I contrast this to broader theoretical claims of a 'transformation of intimacy' that posit a move to atomised relations across the Global North, including a growing tendency towards singledom. Yet assumptions of coupledness clearly persist in Australian policy and social life. I reflect on transformations of singledom and living alone during and prior to the pandemic, exposing tensions between theorisations, local realities, and the governance of sex and singledom.

KEYWORDS: Australia, couples, COVID-19, family, intimacy, law, sex, singles

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a pandemic and governments across the globe began implementing rules aimed at stemming the spread of the virus. Commonplace were quarantines; physical distancing; rules governing touch; restricted access to public spaces; and lockdowns and border controls. Yet despite similarities in responses, governments worldwide took vastly different regulatory approaches to physical proximity, touch and sex, and the degree to which these applied to single citizens or those living alone. English legislation effectively rendered it illegal for those living alone to have sex at home, and numerous cities in the United States overtly encouraged masturbation over partnered sex (Gross and Moses 2020). The Dutch government vocally encouraged its single citizens to find a trusted *seksbuddy* to allow physical contact and stave off loneliness, while the Danish Health Authority voiced its approval of casual sex encounters.

In this article, I focus on Australian government rules implemented between early and mid-2020 during the country's 'first wave' of infections. This was

characterised by a nationwide 'lockdown' as well as by state and territory enforcement of federal government guidelines. I argue that these measures were overtly couple- and family-centred, and examine the resultant disruptions to intimacy and sex for those living alone and single people. I explore how these changes relate to a possible 'transformation of singledom'.

For several decades, anthropologists and sociologists of relationships have posited a 'transformation of intimacy' towards more atomised and unstable personal relations, writing about contexts like Australia, the United States, Europe and Japan. One purported feature is that people are increasingly living alone outside the bounds of conventional coupledness. Yet alongside claims of individualising intimacies – known sociologically as 'cold intimacies', 'liquid love' or 'pure relationships' (Bauman 2003; Giddens 1992; Illouz 2012) – assumptions of coupledness persist. This was apparent in Australia from the early days of the pandemic.

I begin by exploring theorisations of a transformation of intimacy – and singledom – and how these contradict or are compatible with national realities.

Next, I track governance of sex, singledom and ‘the household’, and how Australia’s response to the pandemic presumed widespread, enduring coupledness. Ultimately, I reflect on emerging transformations of intimacy and singledom as they relate to theorisations, local realities and regulations and law enforcement during the pandemic. I situate the Australian experience in a global context and in relation to prior studies of sex and singledom.

The Transformation of Singledom

Anthony Giddens’ book, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, proposed a move to individualised, contingent and contractual relations characterised by greater autonomy in partner choice and a decline of long-term coupling. Giddens (1992) understood these as positive developments, developments that rendered people freer and more equal. He labelled them ‘pure relationships’ that were sustained through mutual disclosure and trust. Other sociologists have taken less optimistic approaches, decrying the loss of commitment in modern couplings. Eva Illouz suggests that relationships are increasingly invested with ‘choice, rationality, interest, [and] competition’ (2012: 10), resulting in the ‘cooling’ and destabilisation of intimacies. Individualised intimacies, she says, result in open-ended relationships, longer courtships and an emphasis on taste and choice. Zygmunt Bauman (2003) similarly notes the ‘liquid’ nature of modern relationships, with loose ties being favoured.

Discussions have since multiplied about the many ways that modern intimacies have been transformed into something new and vastly different. These transformations are often seen as emerging from the Global North. Yet recent anthropological examinations of shifting marriage and kinship move beyond such contexts, exploring, for instance, the growing prevalence of romantic love marriage in Pakistan (Maggi 2006). Moreover, theorisations of the transformation of intimacy – whether considered positive or negative – have been roundly critiqued by both anthropologists and sociologists for emphasising change over continuity (Jamieson and Simpson 2013; McKenzie 2015). These scholars highlight how choice and freedom prevail *alongside* continued commitment.

Features seen as portending a transformation of intimacy include singledom, living alone and short-term relationships. Lynn Jamieson and Roona Simpson (2013) critique the assumption that global increases in living alone reflect a loss of permanent relations. They cite migration and ageing as key elements, both

being highly evident in Australia as well as in the United Kingdom, where their research is focussed. In the past 25 years, there has been a modest rise in the proportion of Australians living alone, and the 2016 Census found that nearly a quarter of households were ‘lone person’, up from one-fifth in 1991 (ABS 2017). Yet the median age of those living alone was 64 years old for women and 54 years old for men (ABS 2017), suggesting that ageing, death and divorce play a significant role alongside so-called ‘individualisation processes’. While it is assumed that relationships are increasingly short-term, in recent years the length of time spent in marriage has increased in many contexts (Jamieson and Simpson 2013; McKenzie 2015).

Australian marriage figures are likewise ambiguous. Marriage rates declined from 1970 to 2000, and were then fairly steady from 2001 to 2012 (AIFS 2020). They then dropped slightly and rose again with the recent legalisation of same-sex marriage (ABS 2019b). Marriage is also increasingly preceded by a period of living together (ABS 2019b; AIFS 2020). Thus, while a large proportion of the population might be labelled single or living alone, coupling and marriage continue to dominate. According to 2016 Census data, 58 per cent of people aged 15 years and over were either married or in de facto relationships (ABS 2019a).

There has been much deliberation over the realities of modern relationships, which complicate claims of a straightforward transformation to individualised intimacies. In Australia, changing family law and cultural practices have indeed made it less difficult to be single or live alone, yet the ideal of coupledness remains (McKenzie 2015). Laura Dales (2014) similarly points to tensions in popular Japanese conceptions of marriage, noting a clear gap between ‘resilient social ideals’ envisioning marriage and family as the only acceptable settings for child-rearing and ‘lived realities’ of delayed or non-marriage, divorce and childlessness (2014: 22). Next, I explore how such (partially transformed) relationships were impacted by regulations early on in the pandemic.

Sex, Singledom and Living Alone during the Pandemic

In early 2020, Australia’s state and territory governments, and later the federal government, began introducing restrictions on public life and physical interaction. Measures relating to touch and closeness included 1.5 metre physical distancing for those outside one’s household, as well as stringent rules around gatherings. These were implemented by state and

territory governments, who enforced rules through policing, fines and prosecutions (or sometimes did not). In a press conference on 29 March, Prime Minister Scott Morrison (2020) announced the strictest measures yet: two-person limits on indoor and outdoor gatherings, with exceptions for those living together. Permissible reasons for leaving one's home included exercise, shopping, medical care, compassionate needs and some work or education. Morrison (2020) cited 'women's safety' as a rationale for adopting a two-person – rather than a one-person – rule, stating that women outdoors would 'be able to walk with another person'.

Subsequent political discussions of these regulations of touch and proximity were strangely sexless, presuming coupledness and emphasising the lost, non-sexual intimacies of families and older people. People aged 70 and over were advised to 'limit contact with others' (Morrison 2020), and touch amongst older people was desexualised, with Morrison (2020) suggesting that interaction with 'support persons' constituted appropriate contact. Struggles caring for children were supported to a greater degree than previously, with free childcare being temporarily available. There were occasional acknowledgements from government that those living alone might suffer from a lack of 'touch' as a result of restrictions, a term perhaps meant as a euphemism for sex. Yet this was not publicly elaborated.

The sexlessness of official discourse might be seen as stemming from the dominance of Christian ideals in Australian politics. A high proportion of Parliamentarians are Christian, especially those belonging to the Conservative federal government that led in 2020 (Crabb 2009). Moreover, there has been a substantive rise in the political use of Christian discourse in recent decades (Crabb 2009). Christianity is regularly branded as a fundamentally ascetic religion that 'devalues the body, disdains sexuality and fertility', and envisions the material and spiritual as opposed to one another (Cannell 2005: 340). Anthropologists like Fenella Cannell (2005) contest this, noting commonplace exceptions, including in 'the West'. Nonetheless, Australian politicians' unwillingness to discuss sex during the pandemic – and their privileging of families and couples – would seem to be informed by a particular publicly expounded version of Christianity.

Despite political silences and omissions, pandemic-induced lockdowns caused significant complications for some. Single people and those living alone asked when they would next be able to touch someone, let alone have sex (Portolan 2020). Worldwide, online diaries documented the experiences of those living

alone: the loneliness and lost physical contact. In a well-known 'lockdown diary' from Wuhan, China, Guo Jing (2020) reflected on being constantly alone, saying: 'I can only tell there are other human beings around from the occasional noises in the corridor'.

In Australia, a Melbourne mental health service reported high levels of anxiety amongst singles and those living alone, who were 'sentenced . . . to an indefinite period of no physical contact and limited face-to-face interaction' (Asher 2020). On Twitter, an Australian woman announced she would be breaking distancing rules – and risking jail – to bring her daughter home so she would not be living alone. At the same time, dating app usage increased dramatically, as did the consumption of pornography and purchase of sex toys (Portolan 2020). Confusion arose over whether people could visit their partners if they lived apart, and under what circumstances.

In a recent article, Grace Gao and Linna Sai (2020) reflect on the difficulties of living alone during lockdown. As single women in the United Kingdom, they discuss their worsening well-being during the pandemic. They say:

I am unable to get those small doses of face-to-face interaction with my colleagues, to have scheduled dinners with friends, or to enjoy the warmth of a big hug as I usually greet others. I realise that it's not just my ability to reason that has been negatively affected . . . but the importance of human contact that makes me feel truly connected to the workplace and social networks. (Gao and Sai 2020: 758)

A yearning for touch and proximity is also apparent in the Australian context (Portolan 2020). The English and Australian governments adopted similar isolation approaches: presuming coupledness to be the norm, heavily restricting contact outside 'the household', and failing to acknowledge impacts on single people and those living alone, despite high numbers of these populations (Jamieson and Simpson 2013). English regulations went even further than Australian ones, making it illegal for those living alone to have sex at home (Gross and Moses 2020). Popular and media accounts reveal similar affects and effects across both contexts: anxieties, desires to be proximate to rather than simply speak with others and a loss of enjoyment in solitude.

Conclusion: A Continuation of Coupledness?

Prior to the pandemic, there had been much discussion of how Australian society and policy privileged

coupledom and family, despite divorce and de facto relationships being more accessible than previously (McKenzie 2015; McKenzie and Dales 2017). Welfare, superannuation and tax provisions have made it far more lucrative to be married or live with a partner, rather than be single or live alone (ABS 2019b). Money and relationships are invariably intertwined, and mortgages are an expected feature of adulthood yet difficult to obtain without joint income.

Australia currently has high rates of coupling, but single people and those living alone make up a significant portion of the population (ABS 2019a). During the pandemic, these people entered lengthy isolation. Their solitude – and the loss of touch, proximity and sex that accompanied it – was not widely recognised or discussed by rule-makers. Yet it represented a dramatic transformation in singledom and living alone, perhaps more wide-ranging than previously discussed ‘transformations of intimacy’ (Giddens 1992). This fresh transformation arose from policies centring ‘household’ isolation. It was forced, rather than voluntary, and radically different to the intensive closeness experienced by families and couples. It remains to be seen whether these experiences will encourage a further move to idealised coupledom, or lead to greater reflection on the intimate needs of single people and those living alone.

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