# Tutorial

### Required Reading

* Macvarish, J. (2006), “What is 'the Problem' of Singleness?”, *Sociological Research Online*, Volume 11, Issue 3, URL http://www.socresonline.org.uk/11/3/macvarish.html, accessed Aug. 2012.
* Tables on Blackboard providing data on Living Alone in the United Kingdom, 2010.

### Questions for reading:

1. MacVarish writes about women aged 34-50. Consider whether her argument that the women experience stigma about living single also applies to the age group 18-25 in Britain. Why or why not? Are there variations across neighbourhoods in Britain?
2. MacVarish mentions Bridget Jones (a novel by Helen Fielding, 1996) who is 38 in the novel and film. Using the tables provided, which relate to the United Kingdom 2010, consider variations in overall satisfaction with one’s life for those living single in this age group. First describe differentials in overall life satisfaction, then explore possible explanations.
3. The discussion of stigma attached to terms like ‘single’ and ‘spinster’ was meant to show the contradictory situation in which the women in MacVarish’s study live. What are the contradictions, and what would have to change in society to make single living more desirable? If it is not enough to simply name it ‘singledom’ but more is required, would a woman’s personal agency be able to influence the situation? If so, how; if not, what would?
4. Finally examine the data regarding the frequency of talking with neighbours for the United Kingdom 2010. Consider whether the people living single have a different response overall from the ones in households of more than one person. Is there a risk of those living single being isolated? Return then to the MacVarish article and consider the degree of generality of the article overall with regard to women in the UK.

# Tutor Notes

The first theme of the tutorial is stigma and the stereotypes that apply to a gender at different perceived life stages. The diversity of concrete experience of life stages can be contrasted with the general statements found in social theory, overall patterns in large data sets, and with the broadbrush way that stereotypes are felt to apply in society. Try to be explicit in noting the essence of **stereotypes** and how social pressure arises from social norms.

For an icebreaker, have students break up into pairs to discuss whether they live alone, and whether they wish to live alone; and whether they are in a relationship and/or wish to be so. Next in plenary discussion try to focus on variations, as in Q1 above. Or ask about what they expect to be their next life stage after University.

From Q2 bring students’ attention to the Table showing life satisfaction (also known as ‘happiness’ in the measures used by the current Conservative UK government, and in the happiness website URL http://www1.eur.nl/fsw/happiness/ and the worldwide dataset on happiness, URL http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/, both accessed Aug. 2012). In the table we see those living single being less satisfied with their life overall. Ask students to consider direct and indirect reasons for this. These reasons are explanations. List the explanations (use a flip chart or powerpoint). One is the stigma, perhaps. Another is the desire for a live-in partner. Remind them of the Living Apart Together topic from the Lecture. Indirect reasons for the observed difference include the economic effects of divorce; underlying difficulties in socialisation for a few people; and the fact that those who live in harmony with living parents are not found in the single living category. Thus orphans are likely to be living single but may be unsatisfied with life for reasons to do with being orphaned, not the actual lifestyle or life stage. A key point is that the observed difference of life satisfaction is both statistically significant and also substantial in size.

Moving to Q3, suggest that the ideal of living as a couple is both an idea, and an ideological concept. This creates a whole series of stereotypes, so that other lifestyles are widely perceived as difficult simply because they are deviant (non-conforming). Next make sure students also realise that as agents, people can shape their daily lifestyles to a great degree. This creates the big contradiction. People’s creativity and desires lead them to diverge from norms. However even the tradition of living ‘as a couple’ is subject to change. Stress that norms are malleable but are often perceived as set traditions. This contradiction is one sociologists must face. Refer to theories that take traditional norms as givens (MacVarish herself does this).

To answer the last part of Q3, remind students of their own geographic and cultural/ethnic diversity, and how they approach making a home differently; make sure it is clear that norms are not geographically homogenous, but that the media and schooling tend to reinforce an idea of homogeneity, as well as ideals of family=good and loneliness=bad. These are discursive connections between facts and norms. They are hard to get rid of after early socialisation.

Q4 is very different and offers a practical way to end the tutorial. The table does not show a great difference in ‘talking regularly to neighbours’ between those who live alone, and others. However this would be a statistically significant difference given the large numbers of people surveyed here. Statistics often misses the real issues because it may lack depth of analysis. So first stress that the difference is not very large, ie not substantial; then stress that the real issue of isolation might be researched by investigating other matters than people talking to neighbours; and finally note that the personal preference or proclivity to be quiet and introverted has been devalued by the modern supposedly meritocratic society. A more direct survey question, such as ‘How often in the last week did you feel too isolated?’ might work better than ‘talking regularly to neighbours’. The question, as phrased, relates to a social capital debate but it is not worded well enough to tap into social capital in a serious way. You are suggesting to students to think critically about the survey data, not take them as facts.

Conclude the seminar by noting the diverse forms of learning that have gone on – theoretical, concretely empirical, and statistical/numerical. Urge students to work out which of these three they are best at, and which is their current weak point. They can work on the weak points by practising them.

For practise on the statistical/numerical side, they can look at a table showing the prevalence of being a divorcee for those living alone, vs. other, in a spreadsheet offered for private study.

They may use all the tabular material in the Non Assessed essay and hence in the Exam. They may want to remember not only key facts (%s perhaps) but also the source, date, and criticisms of those facts that make us **empirically excellent** in writing sociological material.

## About this resource

‘The Sociology of Personal Life: Living Alone’ was developed by the ESSTED team in collaboration with Professor Sue Heath the convenor of The Sociology of Personal Life at The University of Manchester.

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