

THE POWER OF ONE

Emma Mansfield, Sunday Telegraph, 15 June 2008

Unmarried? Living alone? You're not the only one. In fact, unmarried women now outnumber married women in Australia for the first time in 85 years. The only difference being that, 85 years ago, our bachelors were occupied with war and the state of the nation rather than Foxtel and the state of their bank balances.

SPUDs (which stands for Single Person Urban Dwelling) are now officially a dominant consumer force. While it's true they were once a hot potato, socially speaking, SPUDs are now so numerous they have marketing gurus scrambling to spruik them everything from TV shows and Tim Tams, to holidays and phone plans. They're everywhere - and they're affluent. They now comprise more than a quarter of all Australian households.

These are the revelations of Mosaic 2008, an analysis of the Australian population conducted by Pacific Micromarketing earlier this year, which concluded that the growth of the SPUD demographic is likely to account for the biggest demographic shift over the next 20 years.

Living in the moment

Frances Amaroux, relationship counsellor with Turning Point Communications, says we're simply lacking the incentive to settle down. "With the breakdown of the hold that religion had on society, people don't have to be married to have sex ... so why bother getting married? High divorce rates also mean that a percentage of the children of divorcees have a cynical view of marriage, and work has also become a greater focus," she says.

Social researcher Mark **McCrindle** tends to agree, believing we're putting off the responsibility for as long as possible. "We're seeing a trend in the delay of traditional adult milestones - marriage, having children, getting a mortgage, locking in a career - and the acceptance in society of those milestones being pushed back by up to a decade. For example, the median age of an Australian woman having her first child is now just shy of 31. Go back to the early 1980s and the median age was just 25 - that's a significant change in just a few short decades," he says.

Playing the singles card

Chronic "single-itis" is by no means reserved for women, however. David Green, 34, a public servant from Wollongong, is one such SPUD. He's been flying solo for four years and admits that the serially single are privy to certain downfalls. "You become known as the single guy, which can be socially awkward - you end up being the third or fifth wheel. People - mainly older people - assume that as a 34-year-old male there must be something wrong with me, or that I'm gay. I'm not gay, but maybe they're right about something being wrong with me."

George Salhani, 27, a product engineer from Sydney, has been single for four years and says even the most practised bachelor tires of the scene eventually. "I have two words: singles table. Complete with agonising small talk, awkward conversation and insinuating looks from would-be married cupids. Wine, please!" he says.

So why, when so many singles are painfully aware of their social shortcomings, does the trend remain? Clinical director of Melbourne's Humaneed, Chris Dawson, believes our expectations have shifted. "Maybe we're just being picky. In today's western society we're encouraged to develop ourselves and expect the best," he says.

McCrindle agrees. "People have more options - life is not as clear or sequential. People are more geographically mobile, people go through more careers, and they move through these options with greater frequency."

But with these fast-paced choices come inflated expectations. "Many single people have criteria that are just not reasonable, which can result in them rejecting potential workable partnerships," warns Amaroux.

Looking out for number one

The fact remains that we have learned not to compromise. "I can do what I like, when I like. I don't have to take into consideration another's feelings, preferences or even outright disapproval. I can decide to travel, move cities, even countries without reaching an agreement with someone who, no matter how much I loved and got along with, might have other priorities and dreams," says Anne Waugh, a 64-year-old retired single woman from Brisbane.

Salhani is also convinced of the benefits of being a solitary entity. "It's empowering; I have a strong sense of self, a diverse and flexible social life, and can exhibit selfishness and lax personal hygiene with no-one to answer to but myself," he says.

Of course, many believe this is a thinly veiled excuse - that women in particular are not opting for this lifestyle, but are rather secretly panicked by the prospect of finding themselves old, lonely and, worse still, completely undesirable. When still able to compare themselves to Bridget Jones or Carrie Bradshaw, single life is palatable, acceptable and even celebrated. With a woman's 35th birthday, however, her chances of a good marriage are thought to wither and die.

Men, more opportunely, are able to imagine themselves as makeshift George Clooneys well into their 40s - but while they can delay the pity experienced by their female counterparts they are by no means immune to the human desire for companionship.

Perhaps by enjoying a little too much of the good life early on, we're giving in to habits we're not even aware we've formed. "Long-term singles can become too self-focused," says Amaroux. "They can also become emotionally hardened from too many short-term relationships. Sex and love become very separate. It can be difficult to fuse these when you do find yourself in a more committed relationship."

Two steps forward, one step back

It is plausible that we're not being selfish - or even that we're not lacking sufficient motivation - but that the traditional model of marriage simply holds less appeal in a modern world. "Not too many people that I know would want a relationship similar to what their parents have. Examples of good and healthy marriages are none too common, certainly not sufficient enough for young people to be inspired by," says Dawson.

"I think women are more independent and less likely to just exist in a relationship where they are not being fulfilled," says Karen James, 42, a personnel officer from Canberra who has been single for five years. "In my mother's generation this was not the mainstream - a lot of women would put up with a difficult relationship rather than be on their own."

Perhaps that's the problem. Maybe we're just now starting to get it right and what we're seeing is actually the evolution of intimacy. "Women in the past stayed in relationships not just because they feared being alone, but because they didn't have financial support or marketable work skills - society simply didn't accept women without husbands," says Amaroux.

"Sex before marriage was risky," agrees Waugh. "It often led to people getting married in order to legitimise a pregnancy - many marriages would never have happened otherwise. The Pill changed all that."

With the benefit of historical hindsight, maybe it is better to be single than sorry. Perhaps yesterday's generation should be saluting today's social diversity. "Parents are on a whole happy that their children have more options," says **McCrimble**. "They're even, in a sense, jealous that their children can travel and experience more of the world than they did before they settle down - but they do want them to settle down eventually."

A new order

Whether this trend will continue indefinitely is difficult to gauge. "I believe that many of our ideas about relationships are breaking down," says Amaroux. "I predict the rise of polygamy and the legitimisation of the 'bonk-buddy' relationship."

The attitude of modern singles appears to reflect these forecasts. "I don't believe a good relationship has to be indefinite. I believe a great relationship can last a few months. It's the connection, the experience, the depth - at the right time and with the right person," says Salhani.

Perhaps instead of social conjecture, what is really required is the embrace of change; a wider acceptance that the nuclear family is no longer the be-all and end-all of happiness and that the influx of long-term singles won't necessarily lead to the collapse of society as we know it.

Nevertheless, the fact is that most of us still perceive being single as the space in between relationships, rather than a status to aspire to. Still, it is conceivable that being a SPUD isn't so bad - it's better than ending up a MASH ... a Married And Socially Hapless individual. Best enjoy it while it lasts.