

Living Alone as a Lifestyle of Older People in New Zealand policy implications

Introduction

In many societies adults of various ages are adopting a new lifestyle of living alone which is often characterised by independence, self-sufficiency, freedom and alternative living, yet is also seen as hedonistic, selfish and individualistic. No previous societies have supported so many people living alone, for living alone may not be a desired survival goal at societal level (Roseneil, 2006). In many modern societies a significant number of middle-aged and older people are living alone as a result of smaller families, relationship break-ups or the death of a spouse or partner. This article examines the development of this phenomenon, including the possibility of it becoming a more dominant lifestyle for *older* people, while exploring

the motivations of older New Zealanders (aged 65 and over) who live alone, and the strategies they adopt to make their solo lifestyle meaningful.

Living alone is usually referred to as residing in a 'single-person household' as a 'solo dweller' (Dickens et al., 2011; Klinenberg, 2012). While living in this way is often seen as contributing to social isolation and loneliness, it does not necessarily mean that the person is socially alone. Research in the United Kingdom and elsewhere has found that, while nearly everyone who was isolated lived alone, not everyone who lived alone was isolated (Rolls et al., 2010). In modern societies we now have people living alone (physically) but with a spouse or partner residing elsewhere with whom they have social contact (living apart together or LAT) (Reimondos, Evans and Gray, 2011). Similarly, there are singletons who live alone but have many social contacts and activities and are not lonely (Birnholtz and Jones-Rounds, 2010). Thus, in studying the phenomenon of living alone

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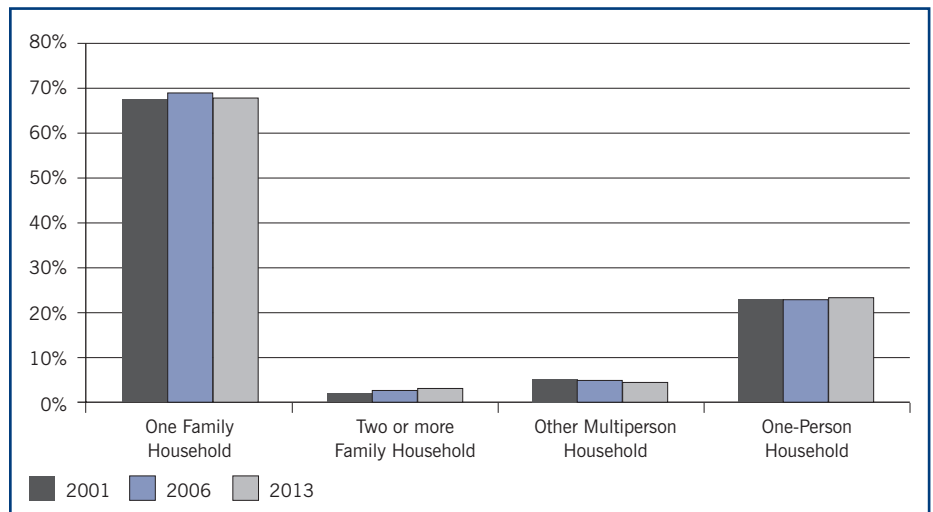
a distinction must be made between living alone *physically* and living alone *socially*, which makes the reasons for living alone more plausible and acceptable to the proponents of the ideal of ‘man as a social being’. Furthermore, Klinenberg notes that those who live alone ‘compensate for lowered social contact in the household by being more socially active, and cities with high numbers of singletons enjoy a thriving public culture’ (Klinenberg, 2012, p.9). As well, a number of people living alone enjoy the at-home companionship of a pet or, in a technologically-wired world, a robot (Melson et al., 2009). In this article the focus is on living alone physically without any other person, but allowing the presence of pets or other forms of companionship devices, and where the older person is not necessarily socially alone.

Trends in living alone

Demographic trends and changes in household composition indicate that there is a growing proportion of people living alone in adulthood in Europe, the UK and the United States. In these and other developed countries, living alone among the middle-aged is on the rise (Falkingham et al., 2012; Klinenberg, 2012; Sobotka and Toulemon, 2008). In New Zealand, single-person households formed 23.5% of all households in 2013 (Figure 1) and are the fastest growing household type, expected to reach 29% in 2031 (Statistics New Zealand, 2013; Bascand, 2010).

In New Zealand in 2013, 44% of older people (aged 65 and over) lived in one-person households, a small increase from 2006 (see Figure 2a). Living alone as an older person is a prevalent lifestyle not only because there are more people surviving into their older years, but also because, despite some narrowing, there continues to be a longevity gap between men and women. Most older women can expect to outlive their husbands (having married older men), which results in older women disproportionately populating one-person households. Examination of 2013 census data for older people living alone shows that 69% of them are women. This gender difference is wider in the oldest age groups. At 85 and over,

Figure 1: Household composition in New Zealand, 2001, 2006, 2013



Source: Statistics New Zealand, 2013

74% of those living alone are women (Figure 2c).

Reasons for living alone

At the societal level, living alone can be seen as a sign of individualism encouraged by industrialisation, mass urbanisation and the empowerment of women. Furthermore, advances in communication and the technological revolution have made contact easier through social media and networking. Hence, living alone is not necessarily as isolating as in previous times. Although the nuclear family is still the norm in Western culture (de Vaus, 2009; Fokkema and Liefbroer, 2008), since the beginning of the 21st century individualistic activities have been encouraged from childhood and throughout adulthood. In today’s family households children spend a considerable portion of their time alone, engaged in exploring entertainment and social media that does not require face-to-face contact. The concept of ‘being alone’ in earlier life may become a forerunner to ‘living alone’ in later years.

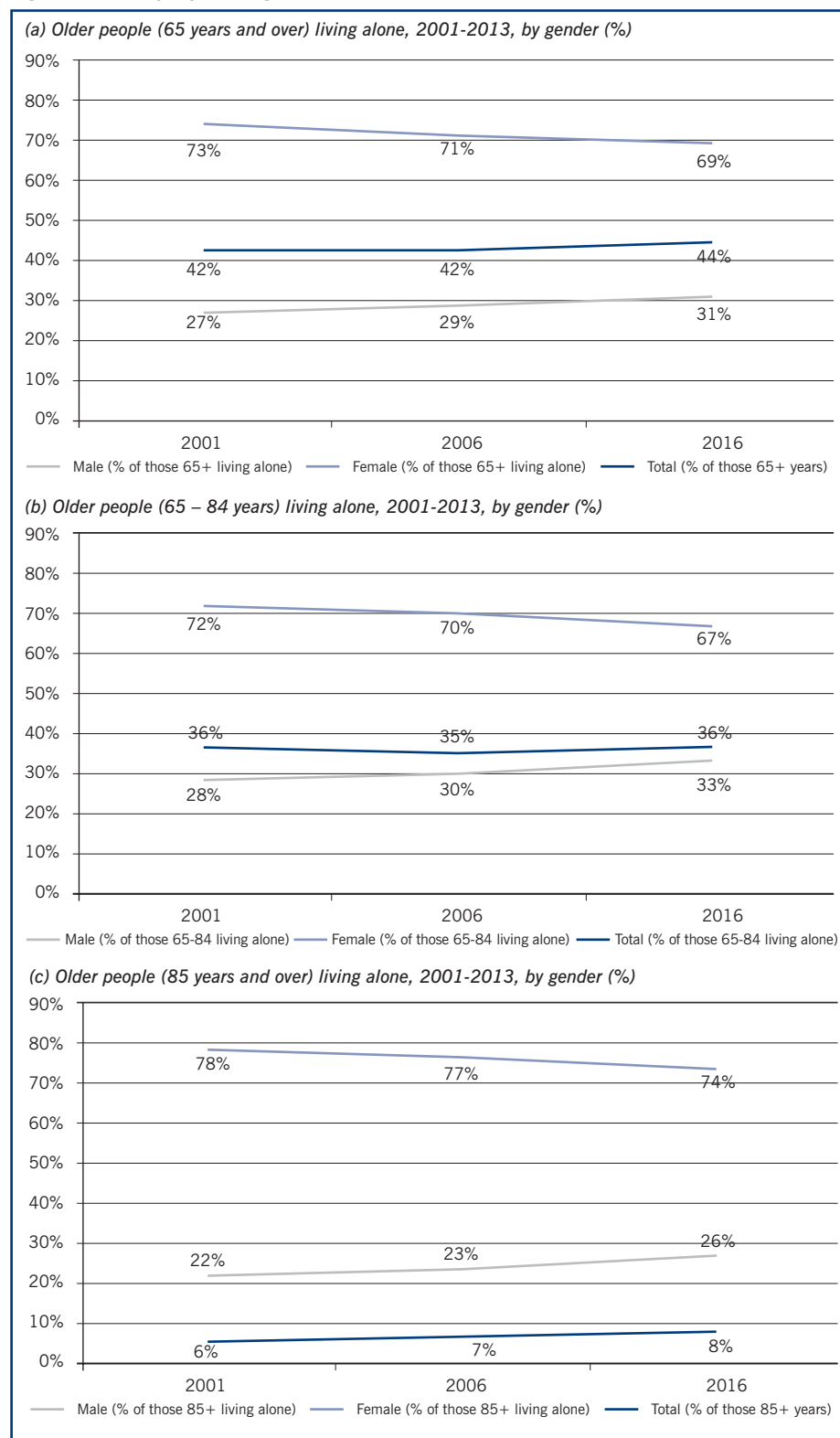
Living alone for younger adults is usually by choice, as they leave the parental home to seek independence and explore their own pathways in life. In Europe, changes in family and marriage values and individualisation of the life course have led to adults retreating from marriage (Sobotka and Toulemon, 2008; Daly, 2005), thereby contributing to the rise of living alone. Falkingham et al. (2012) found that in the UK the reasons for living alone among middle-aged adults arise

from situations where people have never cohabited or there has been a dissolution of a marriage or co-habitation.

Unlike young and middle-aged adults, the current cohort of older people in New Zealand have usually been married. For them living alone is often not by choice, but rather due to the loss of a spouse through death or a dependent family member ‘moving on’. There are, however, an increasing number of older people living alone through choice (after divorce or remaining single), and this number is likely to increase with the ageing of younger cohorts who have experience of living alone. It has also been found that while most older people do not choose to live alone to start with, they choose to *continue* to live alone, this having become a ‘natural part of their identity, or something inevitable’ (Portacolone, 2011, p.824).

In New Zealand it is possible that the policy of ‘ageing in place’ is one of the determinants of older people being able to live alone and stay living alone – i.e. not moving in with the family or into residential care. For older people, ageing in place may mean ageing ‘in your own place’ or ‘being able to stay living in an environment of their choice’ (Robinson, 2007, p.3), with support measures to ‘ensure that housing is adequate and appropriate to enhance the wellbeing and health of older people, while also promoting independence, choice and social contact’ (Davey et al., 2004, p.13). Thus, health, disability and social support

Figure 2: Older people living alone in New Zealand, 2001, 2006, 2013 censuses



Source: Statistics New Zealand, 2014a

needs of older people are assessed and provided for through a mix of public, community and family-based care. Nevertheless, the choice of a place to live alone may differ according to health status, financial situation or cultural background. For Māori the preference may be to live alone close to a marae

where they can mix with other Māori of different ages and undertake cultural activities (Kēpa, Wiles and Wild, 2011).

Are older people living alone satisfied with their life and having a meaningful life?

While older people have similar human needs to those in middle age,

they can be distinguished by two unique characteristics: maturity and diminishing reserve (Koopman-Boyden, 1988, p.699). It is these characteristics that determine their motivations and strategies to adopt a particular lifestyle, be it living alone, with family members or in group housing. The concept of ‘maturity’ relates to the person’s life experiences through work and family life, which provide them with wisdom and skills to adapt to life situations. Along with possessing maturity, older people have to cope with ‘diminishing reserve’ – biological, social, economic and political. Older people have different abilities (or inabilities) to cope with changes in their health, social engagement, living arrangements, paid and unpaid work, financial situations and civic participation. Within the cohort of older people there is huge diversity in these characteristics which differentiate them from other age groups (Gaymu and Springer, 2010; Kēpa, Wiles and Wild, 2011; O’Sullivan and Ashton, 2012).

Such diversity could well obscure the levels of satisfaction, well-being and meaningful life that are currently being explored internationally and in New Zealand. Findings show that people who live alone as a group are not as happy or as satisfied with their lives as those who live with a partner or with others (Merz and Huxhold, 2010; Netuveli et al., 2006). This also applies to older people. A 2007 survey of New Zealanders aged 65–84 showed higher overall levels of satisfaction with life for couples than for people who lived alone or with others (van der Pas, 2009). Even so, a 2012 survey showed that 72% of older people living alone never feel isolated (Statistics New Zealand, 2014b).

Older people who live alone can nevertheless live a meaningful life, even though ‘meaningful life’ is difficult (impossible?) to measure and to assess, given its qualitative and subjective nature. In the Active Ageing research project (Koopman-Boyden, 2014),¹ the concept of a ‘meaningful life’ for an older person is ‘a life where the person living it has a sense of purpose or motivation, and a feeling of significance’. Among research

participants in this project who lived alone, almost all agreed that their life had 'meaning'. They may not have been totally satisfied with getting older or with living alone, with their housing or mobility, but they were adamant that their life was meaningful in this sense.

Many of the older people noted that a solo lifestyle gave them freedom, which allowed them considerable choice and control in the use of time, resources (personal and economic) and social engagement. Living alone also provided them with the *motivation* to 'do what we want, when we want, and how we want', and they 'wouldn't have it any other way', or had 'got used to it' and would 'not change now'. Studies in the US and European countries (such as Sweden and Norway) also support this conclusion that freedom and independence are the key motivators for continuing to adopt a solo lifestyle (Gillsjö, Schwartz-Barcott and von Post, 2011; Portacolone, 2011; Sundsli, Espnes and Söderhamn, 2013).

Living alone also gave the older people a 'feeling of significance', including an identity characterised by being able to manage their life on their own and engage in activities of their choice, leading to achievement, belonging and being valued. While some drew significance from past achievements, others drew significance from their current activities when they led to achievements such as a productive garden or learning to use a new skill (Yetter, 2003; Reichstadt et al., 2010; Lundman et al., 2012). Furthermore, engaging in paid or voluntary work gives older people living alone a sense of belonging (Tsang, Liamputtong and Pierson, 2004), being seen as contributing to the community and rewarded with appreciation, along with the feeling of being valued (Dale, Söderhamn and Söderhamn, 2012; Rolls et al., 2010).

Strategies for living alone as an older person and achieving a meaningful life

Thus, for some older people, living alone can be a way of achieving independence. Having attained this, they often establish strategies to enable them to achieve a meaningful life (especially at the 'maturity' level). The solo lifestyle allows the development of relationships at three levels:

Personal activities (self-relationship): self-care – doing things by/for themselves; personal care, exercise; learning new skills; hobbies or sports; household tasks – housework, gardening, cooking; managing daily routine.

Social interaction (interpersonal relationship): contact with family and friends, especially grandchildren; social clubs/groups; marae involvement.

Public/community (public relationship): paid work; volunteering and unpaid work; intergenerational activities.

In the pursuit of a meaningful life, older people living alone engage in strategies to maintain social connectedness through established interpersonal relationships with family and friends. Having grandchildren provides a family role and a reason for regular visits. Some choose to live close to a family member or close friend, providing the security that someone is available to help them and stay overnight. It also allows for companionship and having meals together. This arrangement was observed in the Active Ageing interviews, especially among older Māori living alone. Many join clubs that allow them to pursue their hobbies in a social environment.

Older people living alone continue to have a relationship with the public through voluntary work. People aged 65 and over constituted 16% of volunteers in 2010, and this grew to 19% in 2012 (Statistics New Zealand, 2014c). Older Māori expect to be involved in intergenerational activities on the marae, passing on their cultural practices to younger people. As well, many older people continue in the labour force, with participation rates for older men increasing from 21.3% in December 2009 to 27.9% in December 2013, and for women from 11.6% to 15.2% in the same time period (Statistics New Zealand, 2014d).

Although older people may have diminishing reserves, at the level of self-relationships (personal activities) most still do things by and for themselves with a sense of purpose and achievement and with self-determination. This includes managing a daily routine of personal care, maintaining health, household tasks and activities of leisure and pleasure. For

older people living alone can provide the opportunity and freedom to learn a new skill or sport, and to engage in meaningful social activities with other people (Yetter, 2010). Maintaining control over their lives contributes to the older person's sense of self-esteem and helps to preserve their identity, autonomy and dignity (Gillsjö, Schwartz-Barcott and von Post, 2011; Petry, 2008).

Current and suggested policies for supporting older people living alone

In societies with a large proportion of older people, many of whom are living alone, policies may be developed to enable a lifestyle of independent and active living. In New Zealand such policies include New Zealand Superannuation, allowing for financial independence; ageing-in-place policies providing support for older people to live in their own homes as long as possible; access to public transport through the SuperGold card; and health and housing subsidies. Such policies recognise both the maturity and diminishing reserve of older people.

The Active Ageing research asked older people who lived alone to suggest improvements to existing policies and new policies (at all levels). The following are some of their suggestions.

Support for financial independence

While most participants did not have an absolute lack of money, several of them (especially women) expressed the need to be able to better manage financial matters and/or deal with possible financial abuse. Policy suggestions included advice on budgeting and managing finances and assets; assistance with preparing enduring power of attorney papers; and simpler procedures for reporting financial abuse.

Support for health independence

While older people benefit from a diverse set of health programmes, policy suggestions from the interviews included basic hearing and eye tests in regular health checks; doctors who communicate clearly; and wider access to fall prevention tools/measures and appropriate installation.

Supporting emergency preparedness

Interviews with older people living alone revealed that while they were taking steps to prepare for personal health emergencies,

many were rather complacent about community emergencies such as burglaries or natural disasters, with the attitude 'I have coped before, I can again'. Policy suggestions from the interviews included encouragement to use personal health alarms (for example, St. John's medical alarms, Age Concern life tubes, Eco Lite Dynamo emergency kits) and house alarms (burglar and smoke alarms, temperature and flood detectors); regular fire/smoke alarm compliance checks; and greater recognition of older people as a resource in emergencies.

Supporting housing maintenance

Older people living alone clearly identified household maintenance as an area that needed further policy intervention. While a number had downsized their houses, many were in need of assistance with relatively small tasks such as changing a light bulb or plumbing maintenance. Policy suggestions included greater availability of single-person, low-maintenance houses with small garden plots, and maintenance volunteers (e.g. 'make-over groups' or housekeeper robots); an assessment service for maintenance needs, coordinated with service providers; and integration of new technology in housing units – e.g. alarms, lighting and heating – and support for universal design.

Supporting social connectedness

While those living alone may have a reasonable level of social connectedness, maintaining contact and engagement are extremely important for achieving a meaningful life. Policy suggestions included support in building social

networks by delivering information about social clubs, interest groups, volunteering activities etc., and assisting people to make contact with such groups; programmes/courses for those starting to live alone (such as the church-sponsored Widowed, Separated and Divorced programme); a regular weekly 'senior's hour' for morning tea/brunch at local cafés; community-based courses for skill-building in internet use, Skype and other new technologies. Many of these suggestions could be initiated through websites, illustrating the need for older people to embrace the new technologies, especially when they live alone.

Conclusion

The increasing trend in modern society for adults to live alone arises from greater longevity and changes in familial and marital values, and is supported by structural changes to housing, transport and social networking, along with public policies to encourage ageing in place. A significant proportion of older people are in one-person households, and with the increasing trend for the middle-aged to live alone this could become an even more dominant lifestyle.

While levels of life satisfaction among people living alone (at all ages) are generally lower than among people who are partnered or living with others, this does not necessarily mean that older people are unhappy with their solo status. Their lives spent living alone can be 'meaningful' (Koopman-Boyden, 2014) and many choose to continue living alone despite the possible alternatives of being with family or in group housing.

Meaningful life for older people is attained through their freedom and independence, allowing for the pursuit of active ageing and participation.

As the numbers of older people living alone continue to increase, policy responses are called for. In New Zealand the 'ageing in place' policy has meant that living alone is possible and a viable option even for older people who need support, but the margin of cost-effectiveness between this policy and a policy of institutional care will have to be closely monitored. The introduction of an array of assessment tools (interRAI, Casemix) should help to ensure this.

While the aim of New Zealand's public policy for older people is for them to be 'healthy, independent, connected and respected' (Office for Senior Citizens, 2013), policies need to recognise the heterogeneity of current cohorts and match their different expectations of life. A longer life expectancy free of disabilities, with the maturity of older age and the desire for freedom is resulting in a variety of different lifestyles. Public, private and community infrastructures may need to be strengthened to enhance meaningful life for those living alone. Policies need to recognise both the maturity and experience of older people by allowing continuity of their chosen lifestyles, while providing care opportunities for those with diminishing reserve.

¹ This paper draws on findings on aspirations for a meaningful life among older people living independently from a project on Active Ageing funded by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment. In 2013–2014, 43 people aged 65 and over who live alone were interviewed in focus groups and individual interviews conducted in the Waikato region. The participants ranged in age from 69 to 92, including six men and 37 women; four people identified as Māori.

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