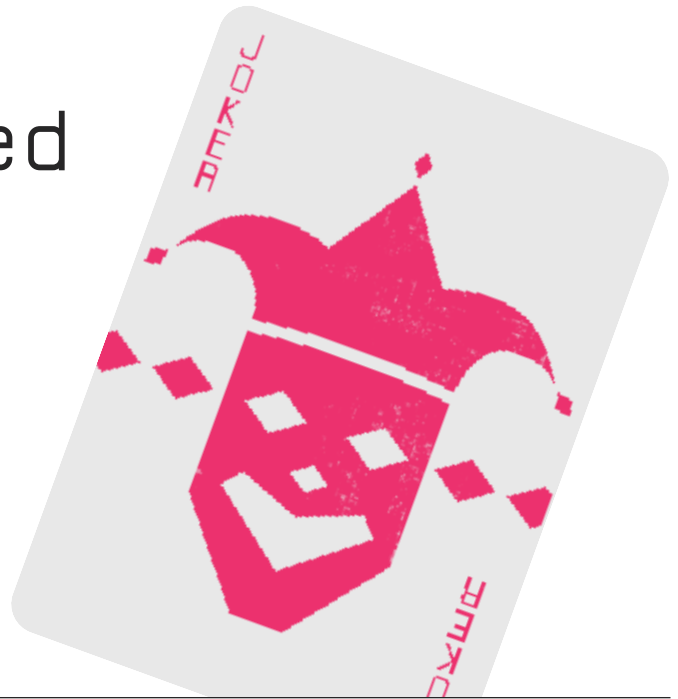


Life in the 21st century: more connected and more independent than ever



BY LAURA SPINNEY

Human contact in the real world is gradually being replaced by virtual relations. Two experts comment on this trend.

It's the most important demographic shift since the Baby Boom: the dramatic rise in people living alone. Today, more than 30 million Americans do it. The trend is even more marked in Europe, and now it's showing up in China, too. NYU sociologist Eric Klinenberg explores the phenomenon in his 2012 book "Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone."

[REFLEX] Why are you interested in people who live alone?

[ERIC KLINENBERG] I had written a book about the 1995 heat-wave disaster in Chicago, in which

hundreds of people died alone, and I grew concerned about social isolation in American cities. I started working on a project about solo living thinking that I'd find great evidence of an atomized American culture, but I didn't.

[REFLEX] What did you find?

[ERIC KLINENBERG] Living alone is a choice people make. That doesn't mean it's their life goal. Most people want to find the right partner, but if they can't find the right partner, they would rather live alone than with roommates or family. In those circumstances, people live alone

whenever they can afford to do so. That's historically new.

Having said that, choice is tricky. There are about 33 million Americans living alone, and just over 18 million of them are women. The reason women are more numerous is that they are so much more likely to age alone, since they tend to outlive their husbands. Few poor people live alone because it's so expensive, but those who do usually do it defensively, to remove themselves from people or places that get them into trouble. Those people tend to be male. Often they have problems with mental illness or substance



LISE SARFATI / MAGNUM PHOTOS

The solitary man, by Magnum Agency photographer Lise Sarfati (Lithuania, 2004). Her photographs of Eastern Europe and Russia reflect a profound sense of solitude, deprivation and emptiness.

abuse, and they have a hard time sustaining healthy relationships. Under the age of 50, men are more likely than women to live alone.

[REFLEX] Does America lead the world in the number of people living alone?

[ERIC KLINENBERG] I started out thinking it was an American phenomenon, because American culture places so much emphasis on individualism. Think of the Lone Ranger, the iconic American solitary cowboy. Our most influential philosophers are people like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, who promoted self-reliance. But by the end of the project, I had discovered that the U.S. is a laggard, not a leader, in living alone. It's far more common in Europe, especially in Scandinavia.

[REFLEX] Is it just a phenomenon of rich countries?

[ERIC KLINENBERG] No, culture plays an important role; it creates a favorable or unfavorable environment for solo living, within which wealth acts as a kind of fuel. Take China, where solo living has increased rapidly in the last decade, as the economy has grown. Or Saudi Arabia, where there is tremendous wealth but virtually no one lives alone. The key cultural variable there is the independence of women, or lack thereof. When you have wealth, a welfare state, cultural openness and independence for women, levels of living alone will be very high.

[REFLEX] Is there a correlation between a country's rate of solo living and its fertility?

[ERIC KLINENBERG] Again, I thought there would be but it turns out there isn't. So, for instance, Scandinavian countries have the highest rates of living alone by far, and they also have relatively high fertility rates for Europe, whereas countries like Spain and Portugal have low rates of living alone but also low fertility. People don't necessarily make a

“We need to make a distinction between living alone and feeling lonely. If you live alone and you are socially isolated, that's very dangerous.”

lifetime commitment to living alone; they tend to do it in stages. Many people live alone for decades but still have children.

[REFLEX] Do singletons pay a price for their lifestyle choice in terms of health?

[ERIC KLINENBERG] We need to make a distinction between living alone, being alone and feeling lonely. It turns out that people who live alone in the U.S. are actually more likely to spend time with friends and neighbors than people who are married, and they are also more likely to volunteer for civic organizations. If you live alone and you are socially isolated, that's very dangerous, but living alone need not be isolating.

We should also be careful about romanticizing the family. One of the most powerful things people told me during my interviews was that there's nothing lonelier than a bad marriage. Both solo and communal living carry risks. If you live alone and you have a

heart attack, you're less likely to get immediate assistance. But you're also less likely to be a victim of domestic abuse. My belief is that we do a better job protecting the vulnerable people who live alone if we identify the specific risks they face than if we lapse into a generalised lament about how lonely and atomised we've become.

[REFLEX] How can society best adapt to this change? Are there practical things we can do?

[ERIC KLINENBERG] Yes. For my book I went to Stockholm, for example, where 60% of all households are one-person households, and looked at some cooperative living facilities – developments where people have their own private apartments but also share common space, including dining facilities. These places work so well there are long waiting lists to get into them. I think we should start building such facilities in the U.S. With the baby-boomer generation ageing, it's urgent that we find better ways to help people live alone while remaining connected.

Eric Klinenberg is a professor of sociology at New York University. His first book, “Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago” (2003) won numerous prizes and launched him into an investigation of the modern phenomenon of solo living. That quest has now culminated in a new book, “Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone” (2012).

“An employer should test your online personality, not your real one.”

INTERVIEW BY LAURA SPINNEY

David Nicholas, a British expert in information systems, examines how being online 24/7 has changed the way we live.

[REFLEX] **Is Google making us stupid?**

[DAVID NICHOLAS] Certainly some serious things are happening. Google is not necessarily making us stupid, but we seem to have developed a new way of acquiring knowledge that is horizontal rather than vertical: we know a little about a lot of things.

Is this reflected in our brains?

The brain is rewiring, without a doubt, and because young people's brains are most plastic, they are rewiring most quickly. These changes reflect how good we are at searching, and how poor we are at holding information in our working memory. We used to carry our information around with us. Now, nobody bothers to memorize anything because they know where to look for it. They don't even remember how they searched for it last time, because they don't need to.

Does this dependence on technology worry you?

To me, what's disappointing is that we're not making the most of the advantages of being connected to a big information pipeline. Everybody now has access to knowledge that only those in the greatest universities had before, but the Google or cut-and-paste generation doesn't understand how to evaluate that information. We used to rely on librarians to feed us accredited information, now we are the librarians. In some ways that's good: we're seeing a democratization of knowledge. But it's also calling into question what we mean by an authoritative or trustworthy source, and people are believing some very questionable things.

How is society dealing with “digital natives,” who have grown up with technology?

Anybody who is 18 or younger was

born digital, so they are now entering the workplace, and that is where I think problems will arise. In the past, employers have said, “We'll change their behavior, we'll make them conform.” But I don't think that will happen this time. Digital is just too big. This is a generational thing. We have to accept it and try to minimize the worst excesses of the system. We need to teach young people how to extract good information using their smart devices.

“Now we are the librarians.”

Has the web revolutionized how we obtain health information and treatment?

There is evidence that people really do use the Internet to find information on health, and that they do so effectively. But what they then do with that information is another matter. They still have to go to their doctor for a diagnosis or a prescription, and the doctor can still only spare them three minutes of his time. He may not be privy to the same information, so there's a disconnect.

What about consumption?

Will online shopping mean the disappearance of real stores?

In marketing circles, there is an ongoing debate about whether shop floors are obsolete. The truth is, we're not there yet. There's a symbiosis of “bricks and clicks.” People often do their research on the Internet, using cost comparison sites for example, then go to a shop to see the product, then return home to purchase it online.

Do we behave differently online than in real life?

People may have dramatically different personalities online, mainly because they need no longer be



David Nicholas led the Department of Information Studies at University College London from 2004 until last year, when he co-founded a consulting firm, CIBER Research. He observes how people behave in virtual space, how they consume, learn, find information, connect with others and fill their leisure time.

judged by their physical appearances. That has major implications, and not only for our social relationships. Employers often use personality tests to establish if people work well in a team. But a lot of professional activity now takes place virtually, so if a potential employer wants to know if you are a team player, he or she should test your online personality, not your “real” one.

THE WORD

Bricks and clicks

A commercial model that combines in-store and online sales.