

Embargoed until 0001 Wednesday 23 April 2014

Couples living in separate homes wish at heart for traditional marriage

Many of the millions of couples who live in separate homes – the modern phenomenon known as ‘living apart together’ – wish at heart for more traditional cohabitation and marriage, research says.

The British Sociological Association’s annual conference in Leeds heard today [Wednesday 23 April] that around 5 million people are now conducting relationships where they live in different homes from their partner.

Professor Simon Duncan, of the University of Bradford, said this was partly due to financial or work constraints. But even where women had made a strategic decision to live apart, they often felt guilty about it or considered living together.

Professor Duncan analysed survey data on 572 people who were ‘living apart together’ - 81% had been together for six months or more and 41% for three years or more, and most lived within five miles of each other. He also interviewed 29 women and 21 men.

Of the 572 survey respondents, 30% preferred having separate homes, 32% said they lived apart because it was too early in the relationship, and 30% said outside constraints such as financial issues prevented them living together.

Professor Duncan said that of the women he interviewed “many of those choosing to live apart in fact would ideally desire cohabitation and often marriage, sometimes with children.

“Far from using living apart to subvert traditional gender roles, these interviewees wanted to move into traditional coupledness as soon as circumstances allowed.

“Sometimes gendered norms of cohabitation are avoided or relaxed and women enjoy sidestepping traditional divisions of labour, or are glad to escape possible unpleasant situations created by partnership with men. However, many women see these benefits as inconsequential or temporary, where the more complete intimacy of the family should be re-affirmed through cohabitation and marriage.”

He found that both sexes were equally likely want to live apart for similar reasons and there was little evidence that the rise in the number of such couples was because women were exercising their autonomy more.

In his interviews with the 29 women, Professor Duncan found that there were three main types:

- **Those who preferred living apart** (8 out of 29 interviewed). Although this group enjoyed many aspects of being apart, especially escaping male authority and traditional divisions of labour, many had also considered living with their partners.

One woman said she preferred that her partner was not living with her because “he can just sort of slob about” but also admitted to liking the “idea of traditional marriage when you get older”, as she was worried about “who will look after me if I’m ill.”

Another woman said she would like to marry and have a child “for cultural reasons, that’s what my parents would accept and it’s quite nice anyway.”

One told Professor Duncan that by living apart “I hold the reins of power – it’s him singing to my tune” but she also was beginning to consider cohabitation “for the help and emotional support”. She thought that she sounded “awful” and “horrible” by saying she preferred to live apart and felt guilty about it, so she washed her partner’s clothes and cooked for him when she was at his house.

Another woman, who said that when living apart one could “do what you want, when you want, you don’t have to ask” but she also went to her partner’s house to do cleaning, washing, ironing and cooking.

Professor Duncan said: “This apparent guilt was perhaps why some interviewees seemed to compensate by carrying out traditionally gendered domestic work for their partners. Some expressed guilt over their ‘selfish’ actions, and some elected to carry out traditional labour services for their partners, almost as a sort of compensation or symbol.”

• **Those who chose to live apart because they felt too emotionally or financially vulnerable, or worried about their children’s welfare** (13 out of 29 interviewed). People in this category ideally wanted to live with partners but were too anxious to do this.

One woman said that marriage was “a lovely thought but impractical” because “when he drinks he’s not a nice person”.

Another said that “in an ideal world I would live with my partner and be married to him,” but “I’ve reconciled to the fact that it’s not going to happen, so the next best thing is what we’ve got”. She was put off by her partner’s radical green lifestyle, which including not having central heating and rarely washing.

• **Those who were forced to live apart** (8 out of 29 interviewed). This might be because they couldn’t afford to buy a family home, because their jobs were far away, because of family opposition to the relationship, visa problems, or other reasons. Although they appreciated the advantages that living apart brought, if these constraints were removed they would live together.

For more information, please contact:

Tony Trueman
British Sociological Association
Tel: 07964 023392
tony.trueman@britsoc.org.uk

Notes:

1. Professor Duncan, of the Centre for Applied Social Research at Bradford, drew on survey data gathered by the National Centre for Social Research and the Office for National Statistics on people in mainland Britain in 2011.

2. The 2014 British Sociological Association annual conference is being held at the University of Leeds from 23 - 25 April. Over 600 social scientists will present their latest research, and 750 people will attend. The British Sociological Association’s mission is to represent the intellectual and sociological interests of its members. The BSA is a Company Limited by Guarantee. Registered in England and Wales. Company Number: 3890729, and a Registered Charity Number 1080235 www.britsoc.co.uk