Solo-Living: Trends in Living Alone Amongst Adults of Working Age

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UNDERSTANDING EUROPEAN LIVING ARRANGEMENTS: PERSPECTIVES FROM
ANTHROPOLOGICAL DEMOGRAPHY
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## Proportion of one person households, 1950/51 to 1999, selected Council of Europe countries

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Great Britain: Trends in Household Size

Source: General Household Survey, ONS

Centre for Research on Families and Relationships
People Living Alone, by Gender and Age Group (%), Scotland, 2006 (General Register Office, Scotland)
The processes by which people come to be living alone at ages more conventionally associated with being partnered and raising children, and their commitment to remaining so, are of significance to theoretical accounts of the impact of wider social change on trends in family and household formation.

- Debates of demographers over the 'second demographic transition'.
- Sociological theorising on individualisation as underpinning a turn away from conventional family life.
Research on solo-living mapping the typical socio-economic characteristics of people who live alone and quantifying movements in and out of solo-living over time (‘stocks and flows’) challenges notions of solo-livers as a fixed, distinct population. Cross-national comparisons indicate importance of context. Social and geographical patterning challenges claims of epochal shifts.

Patterns of change in the ‘social sexual order’ of partnership

- USA: ‘dualism of marriage and non-marriage’ – higher rates of young marriage, virginal marriage and young childbearing, high rates of youth independence, single parenthood and divorce
- North/Western Europe: Early youth independence, late marriage, cohabitation/sex before marriage more established norms.
- Southern Europe: Leaving parental home on marriage, late marriage, low rates of divorce/lone parenthood.
- Eastern Europe: transition – degree of divergence from long established nearly universal marriage. High divorce rates alongside higher rates of marriage, less cohabitation/sex before marriage than northwestern Europe.

Two year study focusing on the social capital, quality of life and present and future orientations of men and women aged 25-44 living alone in urban/rural localities in Scotland.

- Analysis of the Scottish Household Survey (SHS)
- Semi-structured telephone interviews with 140 individuals using the SHS as a sampling frame (75 men, 65 women).
- In-depth follow-up interviews with 40 individuals.
Partner relationships of solo-livers: meanings and motivations

This research explored whether solo-livers who had or wished to have intimate sexual/romantic relationships, sought to sustain a separation of such relationships from co-residence, parenting and family life.

Several commentators suggest ‘living-apart-together’ relationships are of increasing contemporary significance. The term ‘living-apart-together’ describes a sexual relationship between partners who define themselves as a couple, are seen as such by other people, and have separate homes. Distinguished from both ‘commuter marriages’ or ‘distance relationships’ of couples who may maintain two residences and spend time apart but who share one home, as well as more temporary or casual sexual relationships. However, it should be noted that a range of different understanding of the meaning of LAT persist in the literature, and varying sorts of distance relationships and ‘living apart together’ exist in practice (Roseneil, 2006).

“Well, it was a two and a half year relationship but I always knew, and made him understand, that it wasn’t anything more than a companion/sexual friendship. Social relationship I called it, and that I didn’t want it to be anything else, that he wasn’t moving in basically (laughs), although he would have (laughs) happily moved in”

(Violet, 40, rural)
“We’re seriously contemplating totally moving back together and having the whole family atmosphere […] we’re just going to, just have more fun as a family and respect and just being responsible for everything that we want to share together. The main reason is just because of the, you know, the main reason is to have the kids every day and be able to have the same base for them and a solid founding”

(Brian, 42, rural, 10 year relationship, 2 children)
“Now I’d say it was a choice [...] at the time I would have said it was something unplanned, but no, now I choose, I definitely choose to live on my own”

(Angela, 44, rural, 14 month relationship)
“We’re both happy with our own lives and we’re happy to share part of our lives with each other but to keep our own sort of life”

(Angela, 44, rural, 14 month relationship)
Caveats

Defining LATs in terms of those who have settled on or chosen to live apart together is difficult to operationalise, even with qualitative data. It assumes that people know and can articulate their views on this, and that they are unequivocal, which does not always seem to be the case. Definition of the situation is further complicated by the fact that a relationship takes two people who may not have a shared view. The dynamic nature of living arrangements mean that people may move in and out of different statuses, with the meanings they ascribe to these at any particular time also subject to change.
References:


