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Solo Living – the meaning of home for persons living alone

Paper presented at the ENHR 2009 conference in Prague, Workshop 10: Dwelling and Home.

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Abstract

Like in other countries, the number of people living in one-person households is growing in Denmark. The share of Danes living alone has increased from 9.1% in 1981 to 16.1% in 2006, and the increase is particularly marked for persons aged 30 to 60 years (the “middle-aged”). This raises the analytical question of how middle-aged persons who are living alone experience and shape their dwelling and integrate it into their everyday practices. This paper discusses this question on the basis of qualitative interviews with middle-aged Danes living alone. The preliminary results from the study show that solo livers to a great extent experience and use their dwellings in ways similar to persons living in multi-person households. However, differences are also observed. Firstly, all interviewed solo livers emphasize independence from others as important. Several of the informants have had negative experiences with living together with a partner, and they like the feeling of independence. However, all informants at the same time keep a door open for the possibility of moving together with “the right one”. This indicates a kind of ambiguity related to the situation of solo living. Secondly, the interviews indicate that solo livers in some cases spend more time outside home (occupied by leisure activities or together with friends) compared with people living in one-person households. This suggests a different balance between time at home and outside home for some solo livers.

Keywords: Solo living, singles, cohabitation, one-person households.

1. Introduction

For several years, the number of Danes living alone has been increasing. A recent study (Gram-Hanssen et al., 2009) shows that within the last 25 years (1981-2006) the number of one-person households in Denmark has increased with 350,000 households. This corresponds to an increase in one-person households' share of Danish households from 29.5% in 1981 to 38.3% in 2006 or, if measured by the share of the population living alone, from 16.1% in 1981 to 22.9% in 2006. Similar increases in one-person households can be found in most European countries (Hall, Ogden and Hill, 1997).

In Denmark, the growth in solo living is unevenly distributed by age and is particularly marked for Danes between 30 and 60 years, the “middle-aged” (the term “middle-aged” is typically associated with people in their forties and fifties – however, since a term for people in their thirties is missing, “middle-aged” is used to designate people between 30 and 60 years in this paper). From 1981 to 2006, the share of middle-aged Danes living in a one-person household grew from 9.1% in 1981 to 16.1% in 2006. The increase was particularly notable for men; in 2006, men constituted almost two thirds of the 30-60 year-old Danes living alone (Gram-Hanssen et al., 2009).

This development raises the question of how middle-aged persons who are living alone experience and shape their dwelling and integrate it into their everyday life. As more and more people are living alone, it becomes increasingly important to establish better knowledge about how solo livers use and experience their home. Most housing research and cultural-sociological studies of the meaning and use of the home and the dwelling have traditionally been preoccupied with families and how the materiality and the meanings of the home are interweaved with family life and the relations between family members (child-parent and parent-parent relations). For instance, the Norwegian anthropologist M. Gullestad (1989) describes how refurbishment and do-it-yourself work like painting and carpentering not only are about changing and improving the physical qualities of the home, but also create and reproduce the interpersonal relations of the family. When a father makes a shelf for his wife, it might have as much to do with showing affection and devotedness as with mere convenience or practicality. Furthermore, the practices related to do-it-yourself work at home also reflect and reproduce the gendered labour division and relations of the family (e.g. the mother preparing dinner while her husband is doing refurbishment works).

While many studies have been carried out on multi-person households, our understanding of how solo livers use and experience their dwelling is very limited. This is problematic, as it might be expected that solo livers use and experience their home different from people who share their dwelling with a partner and/or children.

This paper reports the first findings from a qualitative study of how middle-aged solo livers in Denmark use and experience their dwelling. A first round of interviews with five informants have been carried out during spring 2009 (a second round with further 6-7 informants will be carried out during summer 2009). As the paper is based on “work in progress”, it is important to emphasize that the results and analyses presented in the following are preliminary. The purpose of the paper is, on the basis of the first round of interviews, to point out empirical observations and analytical questions that might be worth exploring further in the coming analyses.

Besides contributing to a better theoretical understanding, studies of the use and symbolical meanings of the dwelling might also inform future housing policies and inspire new designs of dwellings for solo livers. Danish dwellings are typically built and designed for families, but as more and more people live alone, it might be relevant to rethink design traditions and create dwellings that are more suitable to the needs and everyday practices of solo livers.

2. Method

The study is based on qualitative research interviews with middle-aged Danes living alone. As the theoretical understanding of solo livers’ use and experience of their dwellings still is underdeveloped, semi-structured qualitative interviewing (Kvale, 1996) was chosen because of its explorative qualities. Each interview lasted about 1½-2 hours and was guided by a number of overall themes, including:

- the present dwelling (e.g. the size of the dwelling, type of ownership, reasons why the informant moved into this dwelling etc.),
- the informant's daily use and experience of his/her dwelling (e.g. how s/he uses the different rooms, what s/he thinks about the dwelling and the neighbourhood, his/her experience with living alone etc.)
- the informant's everyday life at home as well as outside home (e.g. time at home, at work, in town and/or together with friends and relatives, domestic chores like cooking and cleaning etc.)
- the informant's previous dwellings and his/her previous relationships and/or cohabitation with partner(s) (including questions about the difference between living alone and together with a partner)
- the informant's dwelling aspirations – the informant's dream about his/her future home (including questions about possible improvements of the present dwelling)

As the themes indicate, the project builds upon a broad approach to the study of the meaning and use of homes. The dwelling is an integral part of the dweller's everyday life and daily practices, and it is therefore important to analyse the meaning and use of the home in relation to the dweller's everyday life in general. The broad approach helps widen the scope of the study and include, for instance, the balance between the time that the dweller spends at home and outside home.

The study focuses on solo livers who have been living alone for at least 4-5 years at the time of the interview and who are between 35 and 60 years. In order to get an impression of the variety in how solo livers use and experience their dwelling, the project aims at including informants with different ages within the age-span 35-60 years, different educational backgrounds and occupations, and different types of dwellings (detached and semi-detached houses and both privately owned and rented flats).

So far, five informants have been interviewed. Two of the informants have been recruited through the author's personal network, i.e. friends or acquaintances of friends or colleagues to the author (however, it has to be stressed, that the author neither has met these persons before the interview nor did know anything about them on beforehand). The other three informants are tenants in social houses and they were recruited by the help of a social worker from a large Danish housing association. These informants are all receiving social pensions (two of them have lost their working capacity because of chronic health problems and the third has never hold an ordinary job position). Statistics show that 18% of the solo living middle-aged (30-60 years) are receiving social pensions, which is considerable higher than for Danes living in multi-person households of which only 5% is receiving social pensions (Gram-Hanssen et al., 2009). It was therefore important to ensure that the empirical material also included informants on social welfare.

The following table summarizes the main characteristics of the informants interviewed so far.

Table 1: Informants

	Tony	Christopher	Henry	John	Kate
Age	37 years old	37 years old	53 years old	57 years old	65 years old
Educational background and occupation	Hold a master of planning, works at the municipality in a large city	Uneducated and is early retired (income based on so-called <i>førtidspension</i> *)	Uneducated and is early retired (income based on so-called <i>førtidspension</i> *). Got a brain haemorrhage some years ago, which affected his physical mobility (he has subsequently retrained much of his mobility). Was independent businessman until the haemorrhage.	Trained as a gentlemen's outfitter. Works today as a salesperson in a private company	Worked as an auxiliary nurse at a residential home for elderly people until she got problems with her bag and finally got an early retirement (income based on so-called <i>førtidspension</i> *)
Present dwelling	Has lived 5 years in his present dwelling, which is a 135 m ² flat under a multi-ownership scheme	Has lived 10 years in his present dwelling, which is a 47 m ² rented flat (a single-room flat with kitchen, toilet, living room and hall).	Has lived 7 years in his present dwelling, which is a 95 m ² rented flat.	Has lived 15 years in his present dwelling, which is a 55 m ² rented flat.	Has lived 5 years in her present dwelling, which is a three-rooms rented flat.
Partner at the time of the interview?	No	No	Yes	Yes	No
Previous cohabitation (married or not) with a partner?	No	Lived together with a girlfriend at her place in 1½ year (around 2006).	Has had three long-lasting relationships. First cohabitation in 7 years, then married with the mother of the children in 13-14 years. After divorce he lived together with a woman in 7 years. The last relationship ended then he was hit by the brain haemorrhage	Has lived together with a partner two times (the first relationship included cohabitation in 1½ year – the second relationship included 6 years of cohabitation)	Has had several relationships, including cohabitation and a marriage with the father of her children.
Children	None	None	Has two children aged 16 and 19 year.	None	Has two grown-up children

* "Førtidspension" is a Danish public pension scheme for people who have permanently lost – or never obtained – the ability to hold a permanent job (e.g. due to chronic diseases). The pension is regulated by Danish law and financed by the local municipality.

It appears from the table that the distribution by sex is uneven (four males and one woman), which might partly be a result of the predominance of men among middle-aged solo liver. Special efforts will be made to recruit more female informants for the second round of interviews. Furthermore, it

appears that one of the informants is 65 year-old and therefore falls outside the target group of this study (solo livers aged 35-60 years). This informant (Kate) was not originally excluded from the interviewing because of a misunderstanding regarding her age. However, the interview with Kate turned out to be very informative and it is therefore included in the following analyses.

3. The meaning and place of the home in the everyday life of solo livers

3.1 Different meanings of home

The interviews show a great variety with regard to how solo living informants use and experience their dwellings. To some of the informants (particularly Tony and John), the interior design and the objects in the rooms (furniture, pictures on the walls etc.) are associated with many layers of meanings and memories about persons as well as personal experiences from the past. For instance, Tony has pictures on the walls in his living room from some of the cities he has visited on his vacations in Germany and US. Tony also reflects on and has detailed considerations about the interior design and his choice of colours for the walls; he explains that the soft colours on the walls in combination with pictures create a nice and relaxed atmosphere in the living room. It creates a feeling of “hygge”, which somewhat loosely can be translated to “cosiness” (although the Danish word “hygge” covers several more layers of meanings than the English “cosiness”). Similarly, John talks about his flat as a “cave” (a term some of his friends originally used to describe his flat). His small flat is cluttered up with furniture, and the floors are covered with rugs, the walls are painted in dark and “warm” colours and he generally prefers to use candles rather than electrical light for illumination. Altogether, this creates the feeling of a cave. Furthermore, John relates memories and personal experiences to many of the objects in his flat. John has inherited most of his furniture from his parents (who got divorced then John was a child), and stories are related to each piece of furniture. For instance, John explains that one of his chairs originally belonged to a famous Danish comedian and actor, who was a friend to his father. He also has a small table in his living room, which belonged to his mother, and he remembers that he and his mother were sitting at this particular table in the late 1970ies then John decided to go to Greenland and work at the American military base at Kangerlussuaq. In this way, the flat is stuffed with objects that connect John to experiences and relatives from the past.

On the other hand, not all informants talk about the interior design and the objects in their dwelling in the same affectionate manner as John and Tony. Especially Christopher and Kate describe their apartment as “simply a place to live and be”, and they do not attach the same kind of personal stories, memories or ideas about aesthetics to the objects and the interior design. However, this is not the same as they do not appreciate their home. Kate and Christopher particularly emphasise the feeling of independence from others as an important dimension of having one’s own apartment (see the next section for more details on this).

The interviews show that solo livers experience their home very differently. In this way, the stories told by these solo livers represent a variation similar to the stories told by people living in multi-person households. However, the interviews also indicate differences in how solo livers experience and use their dwelling compared with people living together with a partner and/or children. First, several of the informants stress that their dwelling incarnates a place of freedom and independence from others’ influence. Second, some of the interviews indicate that the local neighbourhood and being together with friends can have a stronger position in the everyday life of solo livers compared to people living together with family members (particularly if compared with parents with children living at home). These two observations will be discussed in the following two sections.

3.2 Home as a place of independence – with a door open for "the one and only"

Several of the informants explain that their home is a place where they can “close the door” and live independently of other people. For example, Henry explains that his home is a place he can return to and find “rest and peace” from others: “You can lock your door and you don’t have to open it, if somebody rings the bell”.

The older informants (John, Henry and particularly Kate) make a close connection between previous experiences with living together with a partner and their appreciation of being independent from others. These informants have all tried to live together with a partner (see table 1). Kate has had several relationships and lived together with different men. She explains that cohabitation involves a loss of freedom: “Everything is going fine when you are living separately. But as soon as [you are moving together], they take the power from you.” The men that Kate lived together with got jealous if she did not come home just on time or if she was doing things on her own outside home. For instance, her former husband (the father of her two grown-up children) was unemployed and often sat at home waiting for her to come home from her work. Her workday finished at two o’clock in the afternoon, and if she was not at home ten minutes past two, her husband suspected that she was unfaithful to him. With reference to this kind of negative experiences with living together with partners, Kate explains that:

“I won’t have anyone to decide for me or control me [again]. Certainly not now then I’ve got the age I’ve got. I want to be able to talk with whoever I want to talk with – and to do the things I like to do. (...) If I fancy dancing, I can go out and dance. If I fancy going to the cinema, I can do that without asking anybody for his permission. And I can go to bed at eight o’clock in the evening if it suits me without anyone is sitting and sulking because I’ve went early to bed.”

Like Kate, Henry and John also think that it is becoming more and more difficult to live together with a partner again as one gets older. One gets more reluctant with regard to changing one’s daily routines and behaviour. Henry and John both have a steady relationship, but they are not planning to move together with their partners. They appreciate the freedom of being independent from a cohabitee and also think that it might be difficult for a partner to live together with them. Henry thinks that also then he was younger it was difficult for a partner to live together with him. Before the brain haemorrhage, he was a self-employed businessman with irregular working hours: “If a job had to be done, it had to be done”, and often he could not tell his partner when he would be at home in the evening. He believes that this way of living (making plans independent of others) has become part of his personality, which makes it difficult for a partner to live together with him. Living apart together (in the literature often shortened to LAT – see e.g. Roseneil, 2006; Levin, 2004) arrangements do not commit the partners to coordinate their individual everyday lives to the same extent as cohabitation. Therefore, this kind of arrangements better suits with his personality and way of living. Henry thinks that when he and his partner spend time together, it is more like a “positive choice” compared to partners living together.

The informants’ descriptions of bad experiences from living together with partners and the qualities associated with solo living challenge the widespread idealization of family life and the popular conceptualisation of family life as a “haven in a heartless world”. The informants’ (and especially Kate’s) experiences with previous cohabitation and married life corresponds with the critique made by some researchers of the idealization of family life. In a review of the literature on intimacy, Lynn Jamieson notes that: “The historical development of a characterisation of the family as a ‘haven in a heartless world’, a private domain separated off from the wider social world by protective

boundaries, relies on a conception of divisions between ‘public’ and ‘private’ that has been comprehensively deconstructed by feminist work as a construction that helps mask patriarchal arrangements...” (Jamieson, 2005: 193). Jamieson also notes that the understanding of “commitment” is in change: “rather than an *obligation* to stay with a partner through ‘thick and thin’ [commitment now] refers to the *presumption* that this will happen because love will last, the valued qualities of the other person will last and the relationship will remain good enough for a life together” (Ibid.: 201). If the relationship does not fulfil the expectations one had before moving together, the partners separate more often than was the case just a few generations ago.

Christopher also emphasizes the importance of being independent of others. However, he appreciates this for other reasons than Henry, Kate and John: Until his mid-twenties, Christopher lived in a group home for young people who had difficulties with living on their own. Professional staff worked at the place and Christopher experienced their frequent interventions in his doings as annoying and as an attempt to control his life. It is therefore important to him that he can close his door and nobody interferes in his personal life.

Although all informants mentioned individual independence as an important quality of solo living, they at the same time left the door open for the possibility of moving together with “the right one” later in life. As John explains:

“If she was knocking at the door and said ‘hello John, I love you – and look how beautiful I am’ – ‘yes, damn you are’ (...) It’s certainly a possibility that I would do it [moving together with a girlfriend] again. I certainly could do that. I’m not interested in getting old alone. That’s how I will put it, right. But I accept life as it is – and I’m feeling great with how it is now. But it might be that I later would prefer to live together with another person who I could travel together with – and we could experience things together.”

Thus, the interviews suggest a peculiar ambiguity in the informants’ experience of their present situation as solo livers: At the same time as they emphasize the positive qualities of living alone (freedom and independence of others), they also leave a door open for moving together with “the right one”. This is similar to the findings of a British qualitative and quantitative study of solo livers (Lewis, 2005), which shows that 51% of people aged 25-35 years think that living alone is just a temporary stage and 77% of solo livers aged 25-44 years think that the most likely reason for changing their living arrangements would be to move together with a partner. However, there is at the same time a sense of “matter-of-factness” related to the informants’ hope for finding a life mate; they acknowledge that cohabitation is vulnerable to different ways of living and disagreements between the partners and that it therefore is difficult to find a partner that shares the same life style.

3.3 Friends and urban life – the “place” of the dwelling in the life of solo livers

Tony, Henry and John spend lot of their time with friends or – like in the case of John – with exercising sport or walking around in the neighbourhood. This might indicate that to (some) solo livers, the home is less the place for daily social interaction compared with people living in multi-person households.

In the summer time, John plays golf about every second weekday (in the evening) and often also in the weekends. John enjoys being together with his golf mates. He also often takes a walk in the streets of the town where he lives. He know many people in the town (partly from the golf club), and he often run across friends and acquaintances and have a short chit-chat or perhaps a beer at a local café. John talks with great warmth about the town in which he lives, and it is obvious that the

neighbourhood with its old historical buildings, local shops, the tourists and all the friends and familiar faces on the streets is an integral part of his overall experience of the life in the flat. It is difficult to separate the dwelling from the neighbourhood, and John often ended up talking about the town when he was asked about his home.

The neighbourhood does not have the same central position in Tony's and Henry's stories about their home, but like John they also spend a lot of time together with friends either at their home or at cafés, in the city parks or similar places. Tony is together with friends on weekday evenings 1-2 times a week and typically two times during the weekend.

These stories suggest that it is important to understand solo liver's experience and use of the home in an everyday life context and with an open approach that also brings into light the relations between the dwelling and its surroundings as well as between domestic life and life outside home. Of course, this is not the same as suggesting that it is not important to have the same open approach when studying multi-person households. However, the life outside home, the urban life and the social interaction with friends, relatives and acquaintances (or the lack of social interaction) might play a more significant role in solo liver's everyday life compared with people living together with others.

4. Concluding remarks and open questions

The preliminary analysis of the first round of interviews indicates that the solo liver's descriptions of how they use and experience their homes in many respects resemble the meaning and use of the home to persons living in multi-person households. This might not be surprising at all, since solo liver's and persons living in multi-person households all draw on the same repertoire of cultural conceptions of home and home life. On the other hand, one might also expect to find differences as solo living in many ways challenges established cultural norms and understandings of the close connection between home and family life (especially in the case of middle-aged people).

One of the most remarkable observations that appear across the five interviews is how all informants emphasize the importance of being independent of a partner. The older informants (John, Kate and Henry) contrasted their feeling of independence with previous negative experiences of cohabitation and/or marriage. At the same time, the informants kept a door open for the possibility of moving together with a partner if they met the "right one". This indicates a certain kind of ambiguity related to solo living, which would be interesting to pursue in the next round of interviews and in the coming analyses. In addition, it might be fruitful to explore more detailed how the informants' experience of their home and of living alone reflects modern understandings of family life, intimacy and cohabitation. The paper has touched upon this theme in relation to the changing understandings of "commitment", but this needs further elaboration.

Finally, the interviews also indicate that the balance between life at home and outside home might be different of solo liver's compared to persons living in multi-person households. Except of Christopher, all informants spend much time in the city, at sport or together with friends. However, there might be important differences between solo liver's, and it might be expected that some groups of solo liver's live a much more isolated life compared with other groups.

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