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**Beyond the nuclear family - A new culture of living in the  
cities?**

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## Beyond the nuclear family - A new culture of living in the cities?

### Background

One way to look at and to talk about the society is to refer to it as a basic composition of families and dwellings. This is a typical perspective in city planning. Also in our ordinary thinking such a representation of the family as a basic unit in society is dominating. In functionalist planning and in Swedish neighborhood planning from the 1940's the fundamental wish was to plan for and build a society where families could dwell and be equipped with different kind of services. The structure of postwar suburbia emanated from this imagination of the nuclear family and its maintenance (Franzén & Sandstedt (1981) 1994).

However, what is the typical picture today of the society and do all people live in families? The answer on the questions depends on how we define the concept of family. It is crucial to observe the difference between the three aspects of the family concept namely ties of kinship, household relationship and individuality. When the concept of family relates to blood-relationships then it means an inclusion of all the relatives. In this case the concept of family is not defined by any spatial dimension as it is in the concept of household and nuclear family.

In this paper I don't concern about kinship relations. When I here talk about the family I am referring to the modern nuclear family i.e. those individuals (mother, father and children) who are living together in the same household. But the household is a wider concept than the nuclear family as it includes living alone and other types of relationships. Thus the main concept in this study will be the household and I will elucidate the household structure in Sweden today and its relation to gender and age. Also the concept of household can have different meanings. In old days this word meant those who belonged together by having their meals together, for example the host family and their servants within the bourgeoisie, and also among peasants or craftsmen. The household was then defined by daylight activities and often related to work and/or

kinship. In Sweden this definition prevailed in census from 1890 to 1940. Since then the household has been delimited to and defined by the night's stay including those individuals who regularly reside and sleep together (at the same place).

However in this paper I want to go “beyond the nuclear family”. I will investigate the composition of households in the country and pay attention to those households which cannot be defined as nuclear families i.e.; one- or two-person-households i.e. singles in a one-person household, dyadic partners living in a two-person household, single mothers and fathers. What is interesting to observe today is also new ways to link households together in everyday life activities and in a common space. New types of relationships are formed, a late modern way of life can be anticipated.

My ambition here is to show what a big share of the Swedish population lives in other households than the nuclear family and that the household with a father, mother and children not at all is dominant in the country. On the contrary to live “beyond the nuclear family” is the dominant form of life today although all of us belong to a family in one or another way. Statistics show that (of totally 4,575 in the year 2006) 20% of the households are nuclear families, 3 % single living women with children and 2% single men with children . 34% of the household are single living people, half of them are men respectively women. Another big group of households is that of two persons living together with no children (0-17 years old) for example young or middle aged (table 1).

**Table 1: Family units by type in 2006**

*Numbers in thousands and percentage distribution (Children aged 0-17)*

<b>Type of household</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Cohabiting without children	1338	29
Cohabiting with children	904	20
Single woman with children	149	3
Single man with children	81	2
Single woman without children	783	17
Single Single men without children	764	17
Other family units	556	12
Total	4575	100

From this trend we could say that the nuclear family is a marginal type of household or family unit even if we include single women and men. About 75% of the household are unites “beyond the nuclear family”. Especially conspicuous is the growing trend with one-person households and single living in the big cities. On the other side we can also in the big cities see a trend to live and organize everyday life collectively into untraditional new types of constellations “beyond the family”.

In the last ten years the interest to live in more collective forms has increased among people in “the second half of life”. This age is a discursive one and suggests a period after the nuclear family when there are no children “at home” but it also involve people who haven’t lived in accordance with the established family norm. In Swedish big cities today we can see a growing interest to live in more collective forms among senior people. This interest is materialized in a number of new and rebuilt buildings adapted to new functions.

A new housing market has arisen. Not only the existence of small households but also a growing consciousness of the changing demographic age structure in the future has got an impact on this new housing market. Building proprietors but also politicians and professional employees at governmental and municipal level are busy working with the question of “housing for the elderly”. Also among private associations it is possible to see a growing interest to discuss the future situation. Statistics show that in the year of 2050 there will be no less than 2 500 000 persons above 65 years old (the total population in Sweden today is 9 276 509). The new emerging market is a market for elderly people who wish to live in a new way. This phenomenon is occurring on the ordinary housing market, which means that it concerns all persons in the older age range and “in the second half of life”. In Sweden it is two forms of housing that are of present importance. One is senior housing and the other is co-housing. These two forms of housing represent a new way to live today. Naturally, they have their own history, but I will not take that up here.

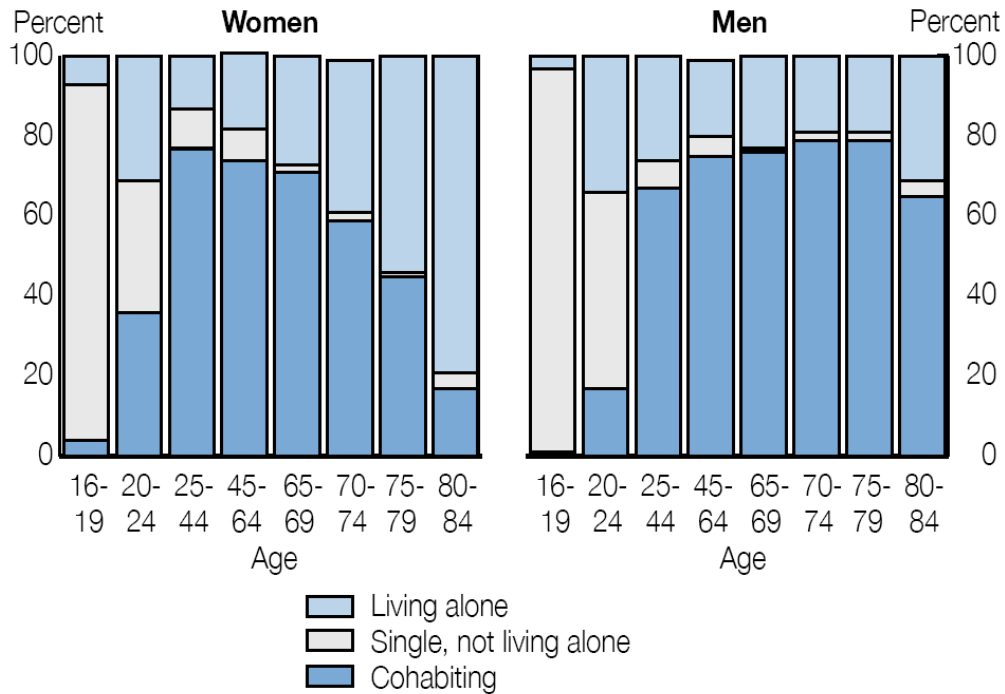
## **The experience of living alone is most dominant among women**

The gender difference in housing is most obvious in higher ages. Women live more often single after the age of 60-65 years old while men are more often cohabited (see Table 2). This difference between the gender increase with higher age and becomes great when they are above 80 years old. Thus, old men are more likely to live in a cohabitation or marriage situation. While women more likely live alone. This fact can be interpreted in feministic terms: Living alone as an elderly person is of supreme importance to women. This also would mean that older women probably are more interesting in alternative ways of housing. Statistics also show that a higher proportion of men live in own houses while women more often live in flats with right of tenancy. This support my opinion that housing for old people is an important question for women.

### **Table 2:**

**Cohabiting, single and living alone by age 2007**

Proportion (%) in age grou



Source: Survey of Living Conditions, Statistics Sweden

Examples of groups which are single, but not living alone:

- Children aged 16 year and over residing in parents' home
- Friends living together
- Brothers and sisters living together
- Parents residing in grown-up childrens' home

### Ordinary and non-ordinary ways of living related to three collective forms of living.

Most of the people above 65 years old in Sweden live in their ordinary houses not in special old people's home. The politics in Sweden has also been that "all want to live in their own homes when they are getting older" and the best, to subsidy home-help service not to build special houses. But there also is a need for special houses for very old and sick persons who cannot take care of themselves. Today 6% of those above 65 years old in Sweden live in this non-ordinary way of living (70% of then are women and 80% more

than 80 years old), while the remaining 94% of those over 65 years old live in the ordinary way (ref. äldreboendestredningarna).

To observe is that this question of cohousing and senior housing, collective ways to live do not concern only senior citizens but also other persons “beyond the family”. If the age level is 40+ then there are much more people concerned.

### **A new culture of living?**

In my research project, I will study three different kinds of housing: co-housing, senior housing and ordinary housing and what they mean to elderly people in the third age, who are living alone. The present aim is to discover how one can investigate the opportunities and limitations of these different kinds of housing. I am looking for a research perspective, a device for understanding, which will guide me in my investigation of elderly people’s different ways of living alone.

The more fundamental question addressed in this research is: Is it possible to deal with the future larger population of elderly using new kinds of housing? Are there ways to organize housing and living that can facilitate the foreseen societal burden of caring for the elderly? Naturally, this presupposes not only directives from the state, but also people’s own will and involvement. The fundamental question can be said to be the same as that of the official report of Äldreboendekommissionen (SOU 2007:103), but the study will be carried out in quite another way and from another perspective.

One interesting question is also whether there is time for a paradigm shift in the way in which we look at old age. At present, it is ugly to be old and old age has negative connotations. Is it possible to change this by finding another way to look at aging – to accept and take responsibility for one’s old age and discover a new attitude towards death?

To understand what it means to live alone in senior or co-housing, compared with living alone in one’s own house or in a block of flats, it is important to study the different forms of housing at an organizational level.

At this level, the questions are: How is everyday life organized? What are the rules and norms? How are the residents recruited? What are the economic, social and ecological conditions of living in the housing form? Are there any moral or aesthetic restrictions? What is the relationship to the surrounding society?

There is a great organizational difference between senior and co-housing in Sweden today. Naturally, all houses in a given category are not functionally the same. The major difference is that in co-housing, the members work in the house and take care of the building, and they also do the cooking collectively for certain meals a week. This is not the case in senior housing, where the household duties are private and the house owner is responsible for maintaining the building. However, the important aspect of senior housing is the common service for the residents.

The distinction between senior and co-housing could metaphorically be said to be a distinction between “the extended household” and “the narrow neighbourhood”. Today, this distinction is important in determining how to finance and arrange housing. One question in my study is what these differences are and how they influence the way of living among different societal groups.

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