

# Persons Living Alone in Finland

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## 1. Introduction

A considerable structural and cultural change has taken place in modern developed societies over the past hundred years. This change has been reflected in all sectors of society and in the way in which people live. The family has continued to be an important institution in society, but also it has been subject to change — change which has affected its significance, structure, size and functions. Furthermore, new lifestyles have appeared alongside of marriage and the traditional family.

The social sciences have long looked upon the nuclear family as a universal phenomenon. It has been regarded as the family type that is best adapted also to industrialized and urbanized society (Parsons and Bales, 1955). Marriage has been and should be the goal of most people in society at some stage of their life. Deviation from the norm has not been an acceptable alternative.

Even so, society has also included those who are alone and who are lonely. Throughout time, for example authors, poets and singers have drawn attention to these people; even in more recent times, they have paid more attention to such people than have social scientists. It is true that earlier, it was very rare for a person to be alone, as social life called for close contacts with one another. Scarcely anyone had a private life. It has not been until recently that the increasing degree of privacy has become a central phenomenon in society, and the individual has come to be regarded as important.

Being alone and loneliness have long been recognized phenomena in society, but it has not been until the past decades that they have been subjected to study. Even now, little empirical data are available on how many people are alone and lonely in the population, and who they are. There is an almost complete lack of research on this question in Finland.

»Being alone» is ordinarily defined as a lack or dearth of various contacts. However, it is not possible to use statistical surveys to study contacts. Instead, being alone must be examined solely on the basis of data on marital status or household-dwelling units. Being alone has been operationalized at times as not being married, at times as living in a one-person household. In this article, the focus shall be on the latter.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Changes in living circumstances

At the end of the 1800s, households included not only nuclear families with several children but often also relatives, servants, apprentices and/or lodgers. As a conse-

<sup>1</sup>This article is based on the author's study *Yksin olevat: ei naimisissa olevien ja yksin asuvien tarkastelua* (Being alone: a study on the unmarried and persons living alone). Väestöntutkimuslaitoksen julkaisusarja D, nro 23/1988. Helsinki: Väestöntutkimuslaitos. Väestöliitto.

quence of the processes of industrialization and urbanization, the households gradually began to decrease in size. Families had fewer children, and also the number of servants, lodgers and relatives in the household gradually began to decrease. A smaller and smaller traditional nuclear family was the ordinary living unit before the Second World War.

Following the jump in the birth rate after the war, there was a continuous decrease in family size from the 1950s on. At the same time, new living and housing forms appeared alongside of the traditional nuclear family consisting of parents and children. One-parent families and cohabitation became more common, and the number of persons living alone increased. The educational level of women rose, and it became more common to be gainfully employed outside of the home. Economic independence made divorce a possibility, and there was also an increase in the number of children born out of wedlock. It became possible for women to establish their own household even without a husband or cohabiting partner.

The increase in the number of one-person households has also been influenced by the higher mortality rate among men than among women. More and more women have been left alone in the household following the death of the husband. Furthermore, many young people live by themselves before getting married. The average age at which people now marry is about 25 or 26 years.

One-person households have increased particularly rapidly in the countries of Northern and Western Europe. Already in 1980, one third of all households in Sweden consisted of one person. The rate was almost as high in the Federal Republic of Germany and Denmark. One-person households are also common in Finland. Around 1980, such households continued to be fairly rare in countries in Southern Europe. For example in Greece only about one household out of ten consisted of one person (van de Kaa, 1987, 1—57).

When we examine more closely the development in the size of households in Finland over the past decades, we can see that over the past thirty-five years the average household size has decreased by exactly one person. In 1950, there were an average of 3.6 persons per household, while the figure in 1985 was only 2.6. The proportion of one-person households increased over the same period from 18.5 to 28.2 percent (OSF VI C: 102—107).

People living alone do not form a uniform group, even though we know that some population groups have a greater tendency to produce one-person households than others. The more we examine the characteristics of persons living alone, the greater the diversity that can be seen; the same is true of the examination of any other population group.

Since this article examines the characteristics of persons living alone primarily on the basis of official statistics, we are able to focus on only a few demographic, regional and socioeconomic features of this group.

### 3. Characteristics

#### Sex

The number of one-person households increased by 325 000 between 1950 and 1985. There is a considerable number of women in such households, although the proportion of men has increased since the 1970s (Table 1). For every hundred men living alone, there are 190 women (OSF VI C: 107, 60).

Table 1. Percentage distribution of one-person households by sex, 1950—1985.

	1950	1960	1970	1980	1985	Change, in percent
Men	30.6	31.6	31.0	33.5	34.5	12.7
Women	69.4	68.4	69.0	66.5	65.5	5.6
Total	100	100	100	100	100	
N	207 465	283 236	363 337	482 476	532 094	

Source: OSF VI C: 102—107.

Most one-person households are run by women. Women are more rarely the head of other households. In 1985, women were the head of 66% of all one-person households but of only 26% of all other households. (Men are generally registered as the head of the household even though today, a considerable number of women share equally in the support of the family.)

The considerable proportion of women among those living alone is due, among other factors, to the fact that women live longer than men. In addition, it is more common for men than for women to remarry or at least establish a new cohabiting relationship. Since men tend to marry women who are clearly younger than they, elderly women living alone have very little chance of finding a new spouse. An increasing number of women in the older age groups have the economic possibility of running their own household following the death of their husband or divorce. Furthermore, along with the over-all improvement in the general state of health, they are often able to manage by themselves for long periods of time.

### *Age*

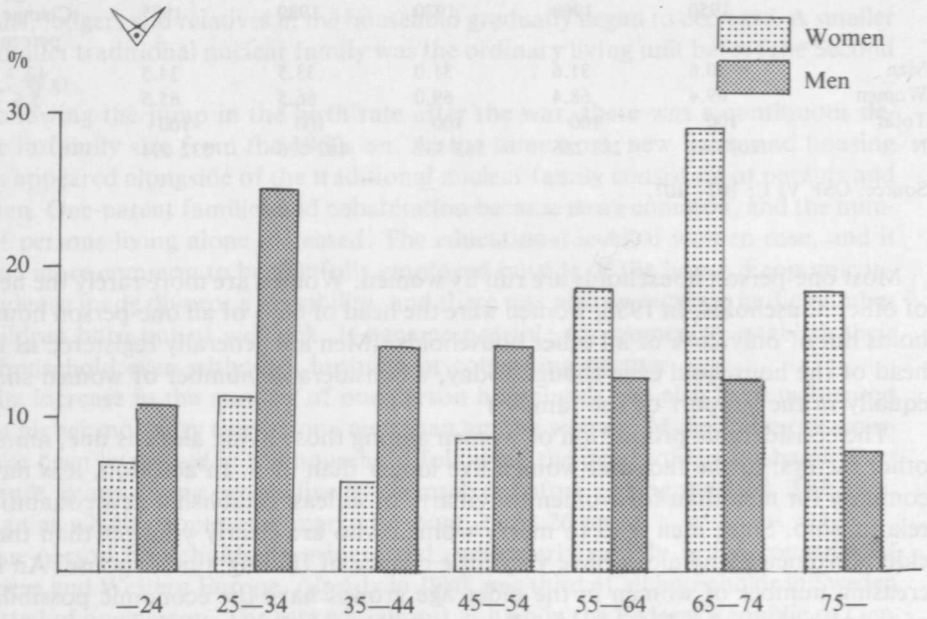
The development of the age structure among those in one-person households from 1960 to 1985 indicates that the proportion of such households run by people under 25 years of age has decreased from 15 to 6%. There has been a considerable increase in the proportion run by elderly people. Also the proportion of 25—to—34-year-olds increased during the 1970s, and the proportion of 35—to—44-year-olds increased during the 1980s. In 1960, 23% of such households were run by persons 65 and over; by 1985, the corresponding proportion had already increased to almost 40% (OSF VI C: 103—107).

The proportion of the elderly in the population has continued to increase in the developed countries along with the lowering in the birth rate and the increased life-span of the population. In comparison with many other countries, Finland has had a lower proportion of the elderly in its population. Since the excess mortality among men has long been high, the elderly age groups include a considerable proportion of women. When forced to live alone, most women are able to manage by themselves for long periods of time, and so a high proportion of women in the older age groups live alone (Figure 1).

Clearly, more men than women living alone are to be found in the younger age groups. Among men, all age groups below 55 years are more heavily represented, while for women the most heavily represented age groups are those above 55 years.

One of the reasons for the proportional decrease in Finland over the past decades in the number of young persons living alone is that there is an exceptionally large number of women who are widows, and they generally live alone. In addition, the proportion of 15—to—24-year-olds in the population has decreased, and the number of cohabiting couples has increased. Today, young couples tend to live together for

Figure 1. Percentage distribution of men and women living alone by age in 1980.



Source: OSF VIC: 106.

a few years unofficially before getting married. This can be seen in the clear increase in the number of two-person households. The decrease in the number of young people living alone can probably also be explained by the fact that, along with the increasing length of education, young people tend to continue to live at home for longer periods of time. As a result, the expenses of running a household on one's own are saved and can be put to other purposes.

A comparison of the age structure of people living alone with that of the heads of other households shows that there are considerably more persons 65 years old or over among the former. Also young people under 25 years of age were over-represented among those living alone. There were clearly more 25—to—54-year-olds among the heads of other households (Table 2).

Table 2. Percentage distribution of one-person households and other households by the age of the head of the household in 1985.

Age of the head of the household	One-person households	Other households
-24	6.4	3.9
25-34	15.5	24.0
35-44	11.2	27.8
45-54	10.6	18.8
55-64	16.9	14.3
65-74	21.1	7.8
75-	18.2	3.4
Total	100	100
N	532 094	1 355 616

Source: OSF VI C: 107.

### Marital status

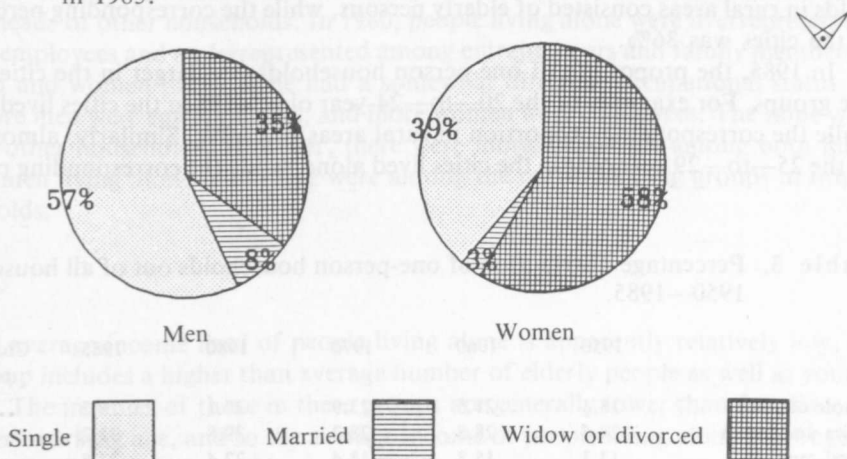
The way in which people arrange their housing circumstances is affected above all by their marital status. The majority of persons living alone are single or widowed. It is true that there has recently been a clear increase in the number of divorces, but for most divorced people, living alone is only a temporary phase. It has been noted for example in Finland that about one half of divorced people remarry and, according to an estimate, about a fourth are cohabiting (Lindgren and Nieminen, 1988, 16).

Over the past twenty-five years, there has been a clear change in the marital status of those living alone in Finland. In 1960, 61% of those in this group were single. By 1985, this proportion was only 45%. There was a corresponding increase in the proportion of persons who had married. In both 1960 and 1985, 5% of those living alone were married at the time. Widows and divorced people are included in the same statistical category, and so it is not possible to observe what changes there have been in the relative proportion of widows and divorced people among persons living alone. However, it is fairly certain that the proportion of widows has increased more, as each year about twice as many people become widows as are divorced, and in addition only a small proportion of the widows remarry. One half of the divorced people, in turn, remarry.

There is a clear difference in the statistical break-down of the marital status of men and women living alone in that almost 60% of the men were single, while about the same proportion of the women were widows or divorcees. Almost one tenth of the men, but only 3% of the women were married (Figure 2).

The high proportion of the single persons, widows and divorced people among persons living alone is clearly shown when the figures are compared with the marital status of the heads of other households. It is natural that the heads of these other households were generally married; only one fifth of them were not married. Some-what more were single than were widows or divorced.

Figure 2. Percentage distribution of men and women living alone by marital status in 1985.



Source: OSF VI C: 107



Women become widows more often than men, and since they usually do not remarry there is a sizeable number of widows among women who have been married. Among the men living alone, in turn, more are probably divorced. There are few widowers, and male divorcees have not been noted to remarry more often than female divorcees (Lindgren and Nieminen, 1988). It may be that more of them are cohabiting, but even if so, they would continue to be listed as divorced in the statistics on marital status.

### *Urban and rural distribution*

It has always been more common to live alone in cities than in rural areas. It is true that earlier, the majority of persons living alone were in rural areas, but then again, most of the population at the time was rural. The proportion of one-person households has been greater in urban areas. Urban areas have offered employment especially for women, and they could therefore manage even if they were not married. At first, urban families offered work for servants, but at the beginning of this century jobs also began to be available in trade, the postal and telephone services and manufacturing. Even so, living alone was not always possible for economic reasons, and many had to live as lodgers in the households of others. Gradually, along with the improvement in the standard of living, more and more women and men living alone were able to find housing of their own.

At the end of the 1800s, there were a great number of one-person households in Finland. In 1880, 23% of the households in urban areas and 17% of those in rural areas consisted of one person. By 1890, the figures had increased, respectively, to 26% and 19% (OSF 1909, 69). With the increase in urbanization and industrialization, more and more jobs became available in the cities. The war years worsened the housing situation and lessened the possibilities of living alone. Following the Second World War, however, there was an increase in internal migration, and a considerable number of single young people moved to the cities. The age structure in rural areas became correspondingly older, and a population group consisting of elderly people living alone began to develop in these areas (Table 3).

The proportion of one-family households continues to be greater in the cities than in rural areas. However, from 1950 to 1985, living alone has spread more rapidly in the rural areas than in the cities. This is probably a consequence of the aging structure of the population, one indicator of which is that 47% of the one-person households in rural areas consisted of elderly persons, while the corresponding percentage in the cities was 36%.

In 1985, the proportion of one-person households was larger in the cities in all age groups. For example, of the 20—to—24-year olds, 41% in the cities lived alone, while the corresponding proportion in rural areas was 30%. Similarly, almost 30% of the 25—to—29 year olds in the cities lived alone, while the corresponding propor-

Table 3. Percentage distribution of one-person households out of all households, 1950—1985.

	1950	1960	1970	1980	1985	Change, in percent
Whole country	18.5	21.5	23.9	27.1	28.2	52.4
Cities and towns	24.6	28.8	28.2	29.8	32.2	26.8
Rural municip.	13.3	15.3	18.4	22.4	22.8	71.4

Source: OSF VI C: 102—107.

tion in rural areas was only 15%. Even in those age groups with the fewest persons living alone, most such people lived in the cities.

### *Socioeconomic status, occupation and occupational status*

There appears to be a considerable difference between the socioeconomic status of people living alone and other households; the former tend to be younger, less often economically active or have just entered the labor force, or else they are elderly people who have already retired. For both of these groups, the level of income was less than it was for those in their peak working years, a group that was underrepresented among those living alone. Recently it has been noted that living alone has become more common also among those who were economically well off, although their proportion presumably continues to be relatively small.

The different age structure of people living alone is already evident in the occupation classification used in the official statistics. At the end of the classification of occupations there is a last, miscellaneous group that includes retired or institutionalized persons as well as students who are not living with their parents. In 1980, this group accounted for 24% of the entire population, but 56% of those living alone. Their proportion was even higher among women living alone: 62%. Of the men living alone 45% belonged to this group. When households with two or more persons were classified according to the occupation of the head of the household, only 15% belonged to this group; among women, the proportion was only 10%.

The occupation structure of one-person households differs somewhat from that of other households. In 1980, one third of those living alone reported that they were in public, social and personal services, and one fourth in manufacturing. These occupations were also the most common among other households, but in the reverse order. The majority, less than 30%, reported that they worked in manufacturing, and somewhat over one fifth stated that they were in services. Persons living alone were also more often involved in trade or in the restaurant or hotel industries than was the case with other households. On the other hand, people living alone were underrepresented among those in agriculture, construction, transport, warehousing and road traffic. This difference is due to the fact that those living alone were overrepresented in women's occupations, while other households were overrepresented among men's occupations.

People living alone have a somewhat different occupational status structure than do the heads of other households. In 1980, people living alone were overrepresented among employees and underrepresented among entrepreneurs and family members.

Men and women living alone had a somewhat different occupational status in that more men were entrepreneurs, and more women were employees. The same was true of other households. However, there were more employees among both men and women living alone than there were among the corresponding groups in other households.

### *Income*

The average income level of people living alone is apparently relatively low, as this group includes a higher than average number of elderly people as well as young people. The incomes of those in these groups are generally lower than for those at their best working age, and so the average income of people living alone is probably below that of other households.

According to the 1985 population and housing census, there were a large number

Table 4. Percentage distribution of one, two and four person households by income subject to state taxation in 1985 in the whole country, in cities and in rural areas.

One-person households					
Income	Whole country	Cities	Rural munic.	Two-person households	Four-person households
— 19 999	6.7	5.4	10.0	1.1	0.5
20 000— 29 999	25.1	19.2	39.3	2.0	0.4
30 000— 39 999	15.7	16.5	13.6	4.7	0.7
40 000— 59 999	18.7	20.3	14.9	18.9	2.6
60 000— 99 999	25.5	29.0	17.2	30.5	14.5
100 000—159 999	6.3	7.4	3.5	30.9	41.9
160 000—199 999	0.7	0.9	0.3	6.8	19.5
200 000—	0.5	0.7	0.2	5.0	19.8
No income	0.8	0.7	0.9	0.2	0.1
Total	100	100	100	100	100
N	532 094	375 443	156 651	514 825	324 365

Source: OSF VI C: 107.

of low-income people among those living alone. Almost one half had less than 40 000 marks per annum subject to state tax. Most persons living alone — one fourth — were to be found in the 60 000—99 000 mark income bracket. Only 8% had a large income of 100 000 marks or more (Table 4).

According to the 1981 household study, only 48% of those in one-person households, but 73% of all households were actively employed. This is an indicator of the different age structure of persons living alone. Since in all age groups fewer persons living alone were economically active than was the case for couples without children, it is apparent that there are also more people on illness and disability pension among those living alone (CSO 1981 Household Survey, 24).

Among those living alone in 1981, persons in the 35—to—44 age bracket had the highest average income. The level of income decreases after this, and many began to live on a pension or social welfare. Among young people, the amount of debt was greatest among those in the 25—to—34 age bracket, at which time their education has been completed and most persons are establishing a home. Among the youngest people living alone, expenses exceeded income, and many lived solely on student loans (CSO 1981 Household Survey, 40).

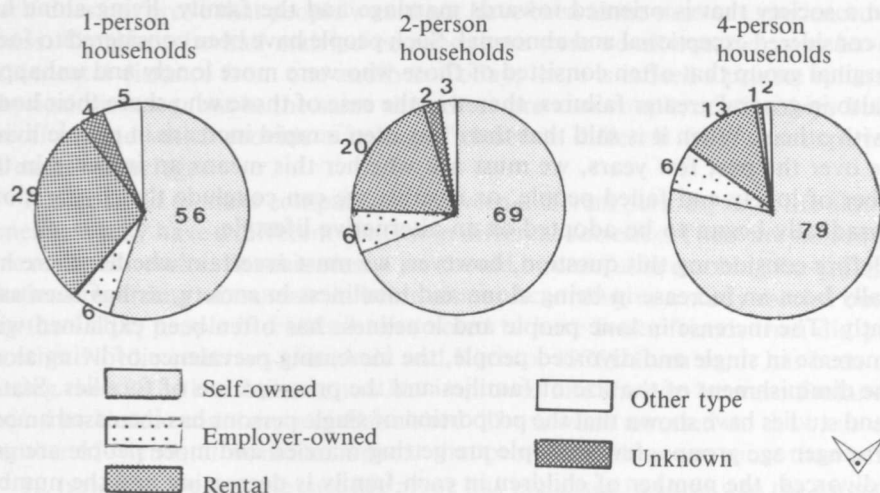
Women who live alone often have only a small income. They live longer than men and often run their own household even though their level of income generally decreases following the death of their spouse. This group also includes women who have never married and, on growing old, must manage with only a small pension. Of all households with a low income in 1980, 72% were run by women. Since women form the majority of those who live alone, and the latter include many who have only a small income, presumably the households with a small income are to be found specifically among women.

### Housing

The low income of people living alone or at least of some of them is also presumably reflected in the fact that fewer people living alone were homeowners, as compared for example with households run by married couples. Regardless of the age group, those who live alone usually lived in housing owned by someone else. Natu-



Figure 3. Percentage distribution of one, two and four-person households by type of occupied private dwelling, 1985.



Source: OSF VI C: 107.

rally, home ownership increases with age, and it was most common among those in the 55—to—64 age bracket. Even in this age bracket, however, only 62% were homeowners; the corresponding percentage among married couples in 1980 was 83% (CSO 1981 Household Survey). In 1985, somewhat over half of those living alone were homeowners, as compared for example with the fact that four-fifths of households with four persons lived in self-owned housing (Figure 3).

According to the 1981 household survey, those with the lowest income among people living alone — those below 25 years old and the elderly — differed considerably in respect of home ownership. Very few young people — 6% — had the opportunity to become homeowners. Of the elderly, in turn, 60% were homeowners. The elderly group includes a great number of women widows who continue to live in housing acquired when married (CSO 1981 Household Survey, 26).

Even though people living alone were underrepresented among homeowners, the average size of their housing per person was greater than among other groups. In 1985, people living alone averaged 0.6 persons per room (with the kitchen not counting as a room); the corresponding figure among two-person households was 0.8 persons, among four-person households over one person, and among the larger households (seven persons or more) almost two persons per room.

Homeowners had the most space per person. People living alone as homeowners averaged 0.5 persons per room; the corresponding figure for those in rental housing was 0.7 persons per room. Also among larger households the homeowners had more space, and those in rental housing had less space. For the largest households (seven persons or more) that lived in rental housing, there were more than two persons per room.

Persons living alone generally had one-room dwellings, although also two and three-room dwellings were common. The fact that one out of ten people living alone lived in housing with at least four rooms is presumably an indicator of the fact that women, after becoming widows or getting a divorce, tend to stay in their former large dwellings.

#### 4. Some concluding remarks

In a society that is oriented towards marriage and the family, living alone has been considered exceptional and abnormal. Such people have been considered to form a marginal group that often consisted of those who were more lonely and unhappy, and also in general greater failures, than was the case of those who share their housing with others. When it is said that there has been a rapid increase in people living alone over the past few years, we must ask whether this means an increase in the number of lonely and failed people, or whether we can conclude that living alone has gradually begun to be adopted as an alternative lifestyle.

Before considering this question, however, we must ascertain whether there has actually been an increase in being alone and loneliness in society, as has been said recently. The increase in lone people and loneliness has often been explained with the increase in single and divorced people, the increasing prevalence of living alone or the diminishment of the size of families and the privatization of families. Statistics and studies have shown that the proportion of single persons has increased among the younger age groups, fewer people are getting married and more people are getting divorced, the number of children in each family is decreasing and the number of people living alone has grown. Does this mean an increase in being alone and loneliness?

The answer depends on how we define the concepts of being alone and loneliness, and how reliable the information is that we can obtain from statistics and studies on these phenomena. Being alone is generally understood as a deficiency or lack of social relationships. A person who has few relationships with others or who lacks a close human relationship is alone, and a person who suffers from such a lack or deficiency is lonely (Peplau and Perlman, 1982).

It is not possible to study a dearth or lack of relationships on the basis of statistical data, to say nothing about how people react to such a dearth. We would need surveys or interview studies before we could deal with this question. Statistics can be used to study being alone only if we focus on those persons who are single or who live alone. Those in the former group lack a close human relationship with a spouse, but even so their group includes people who are cohabiting or who live with their parents, children, relatives or friends. The latter group, on the other hand, live alone, although from the official point of view a small portion of them continue to be recorded as being married. It is not possible in the case of either group to take into consideration their other relationships, or the quantity and quality of these relationships.

We can say that being alone has increased in society if we pay attention only to the proportion of people who are not married or who live alone. On the other hand, it is difficult to gather evidence for the argument that being alone, when defined in any other manner, has increased. Presumably the views that have recently been expressed on the increase in being alone and loneliness are based on an instinctive assessment. Today, people pay more attention to their mental well-being and turn to experts with their problems. Similarly, use is made of various services that introduce people to new acquaintances. This, however, does not prove that there has been an increase in life alone or loneliness.

In earlier times, it required a lot of work and effort to meet people's basic needs. No energy was left over for exploring one's own feelings; this was not even something people were able to do. It was not until the advent of the welfare society that mental well-being became important and people began to turn to professionals for assistance. Furthermore, life alone and solitude are experienced in different ways

at different times. Even though earlier, people lived in more cramped housing and in established village societies in close physical proximity with one another, this in itself does not prove that people would not have been alone then or experienced loneliness. Couples who had married because there were no alternatives may have felt at a mental distance from one another. Today, there is indeed a private sphere and physical distance, but at the same time there are also couple relationships built on emotions and which provide a feeling of closeness different from that experienced in earlier marriages.

It is difficult to make comparisons between different periods, since life alone and loneliness may have a different content in different societies. There are no comparative research results. For this reason we should be careful in reaching far-going conclusions regarding an increase in being alone. According to a study carried out during the 1970s, people in Finland were noted to have fewer friends than did people in other Nordic countries (Jaakkola and Karisto, 1976). Even so, it has been noted during the 1980s that the situation has improved and the gap between Finland and the other Nordic countries has diminished. Thus, when assessed on the basis of the number of friends, it would not appear that people are alone any more than before.

If, however, we assume that life alone has increased in society to the extent that more people than before are alone at least at some stage in their life, is this to be interpreted to mean that being alone has become an alternative lifestyle, or does it mean that there has been an increase in the number of lonely people who consider themselves failures, i.e., in people left alone?

Up to now, no results that would clearly support either alternative have been obtained. Each view has its adherents. Some take the view that in an increasingly de-personified society, marriage has a central significance, and there is a decrease in the well-being of people who are alone. Others, in turn, take the view that being alone has become an alternative to being married.

Although the research results and statistics do not lend support to either view — whether or not being alone is a deliberate choice — we may presumably assume that in modern society it involves more choice than before. In a society of many values people have different goals in their life. Also, women are not solely set on becoming wives and mothers; instead, an increasing number want to receive an education and succeed at work.

Studies (for example Spreizel and Riley, 1974) have shown that women who are alone are clearly better educated, and have obtained better jobs than men who are alone. It has been noted that women are less likely than men to marry a person with a lower education or a poorer occupational status, and thus being single is common among those with the highest level of education. However, for most people the choice of being alone does not mean that marriage would have been counted out already from the start. On the basis of various choices, marriage has gradually been postponed until there is no longer any desire to get married at all, or a spouse is no longer found. With such a gradual development, it is easier to adapt to being alone, and this does not lead to any strong feelings of loneliness. Even so, some single people have remained alone against their will, and at least at first feel lonely.

There is also a choice involved in being alone after marriage. Following a divorce, some live with their children or deliberately choose to live alone without wanting to enter a new couple relationship. Being alone on the basis of free choice does not lead to suffering from feelings of loneliness. Life can be interesting even without a new marriage. However, half of those who have divorced do enter into a new marriage, which eases possible feelings of loneliness. On the other hand those people

who, despite their hopes, are unable to find a new spouse may suffer from loneliness for a long time.

Among widows, being alone may often be connected with being left alone. Since the great majority of widows are women, it is often impossible for them to find a new spouse even though they would want one. Studies have noted that they suffer the most from loneliness on the death of their spouse. Being suddenly left alone leads to feelings of insecurity and helplessness. Since those who become widows are often quite elderly, it may be difficult to get used to a lonelier life. Such people easily retreat into their own world and life loses its meaning. It is true that many studies have shown that their relationship with their children, relatives and acquaintances becomes more important following the death of their spouse. Even though it has been shown that the death of one's spouse results in a lowered standard of living for the widow, most widows are homeowners and are also able to keep their home. Such factors as pension systems and improved standards of health mean that widows have many good years before them on the death of their spouse.

Few people want to live their life alone. However, an increasing number are alone at some stage in their life. For some people, being alone leads to strong feelings of loneliness, while others adapt to this more easily. The increase in people who are alone, in other words in single people and people who live alone, does not necessarily mean that the development in society has been detrimental, that people would be lonelier than before. It may also be a question of the fact that today people have greater possibilities of deciding on their own life, of making various choices. Furthermore, the decisions are not always irrevocable; instead, they can be corrected at different stages in one's life.

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