

Consumption, Households and Daily Life: Implications of changing living arrangements

Luke Yates

Hallsworth Research Fellow, Sociology, University of Manchester
2014 - 2017

Households and Demographic Change

Debates about the decline of family structures, community life and rise of individualisation dominate accounts of socio-cultural change. Among the more compelling evidence is the global transition towards smaller households. Households have been diminishing in numbers of inhabitants over a large majority of the world's countries since 1950 (Kuznets 1982, MacKellar et al 1995). Around a third of households in North America, Europe, and Japan are now of only one person, and trends are forecasted to continue (Jamieson and Simpson 2013). Smaller households are associated with economic development and rising affluence, changing family structures, longer life expectancies and increased mobility (Hall et al 1997). Implications are far-reaching.

Figure 1 International Comparison of Mean Size of Households and Percentage of One-person Households (adapted from Nishioka et al 2011)

Country	(Year)	Mean size of households (persons)	Percentage of one-person households (%)
Norway	(2005)	2.3	38
Sweden	(2005)	2.0	46
Denmark	(2006)	2.2	38
UK	(2006)	2.4	29
Germany	(2006)	2.1	39
Austria	(2005)	2.4	34
Netherlands	(2005)	2.3	35
USA	(2005)	2.6	26
Canada	(2006)	2.5	27
South Korea	(2005)	2.9	20
Japan	(2005)	2.56	29.5

Implications for Daily Life and Sustainability

The phenomenon of one-person households is beginning to come under scrutiny alongside increased attention to 'alternative', that is to say unusually communal or non-familial, forms of living arrangements (Klinenberg 2012, Jamieson and Simpson 2013, Jarvis 2015, Yates 2015). Life in one-person and larger shared households are increasingly well documented but lack of comparison makes it hard to evaluate change or differences between household types. The assumption is that people living alone do nearly everything alone and people living with others do everything together.

These questions are given new urgency, in normative and policy terms, by concerns about the environmental consequences of recent change. Shrinking households have been named among the major problems facing climate change mitigation efforts (Liu et al 2003, Keilman 2003, Williams 2007). Smaller households, holding all else constant, increase energy consumption, domestic waste, production of CO₂, and biodiversity losses across a range of national contexts (MacKellar et al 1995, O'Neill and Chen 2002, Moll et al 2005). The processes are presumed to be simple: one-person households cannot benefit from the efficiencies of 'normal' (i.e. nuclear family) household economies of scale where several people appear to share space, domestic upkeep, meals and forms of entertainment, particularly significant with regard to direct energy consumption (Williams 2007). Daily life in small or one-person households is presumed to be qualitatively similar as life in larger or nuclear family households, but is quantitatively different; people living alone simply do, own, make and consume more resource-intensive things alone rather than together.

How far does this hold? What are the mechanisms underpinning these differences? What promise does analysis and theory around scale and sharing hold for the study of sustainable consumption?



Figure 2 Conventional ideas of families remain important for all household types and are the assumed standard for academic and popular accounts of everyday life

Researching Consumption Practices in British Households

Data from quantitative surveys of time use and consumption practices are analysed alongside secondary and archival literature to address a series of aims:

- **To analyse changes in eating patterns**, comparing the content and timings of meals in the 1950s with 2012, alongside increases in 'eating out', eating at work and lone eating (Yates and Warde 2015, Yates and Warde forthcoming).
- **To map the diversity of forms of sharing across practices for different kinds of households**, examining patterns of meal preparation, cooking and eating for and with others, the sharing of responsibility and labour in the domestic sphere, and the distribution of goods in households (Yates, in preparation).
- **To investigate the changing role of the household in provisioning and hosting practices** corresponding with major technological changes and shifts in the meaning of 'home' – from launderettes to domestic washing machines, from family meals to eating out, from cinemas and pubs to home entertainment.
- **To theorise economies of scale and sharing**, identify broad trends in modes of provisioning, and evaluate their political and environmental consequences

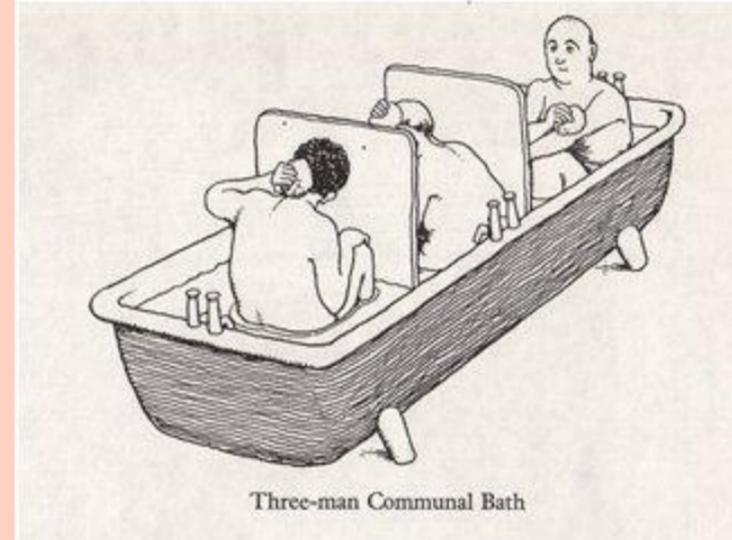
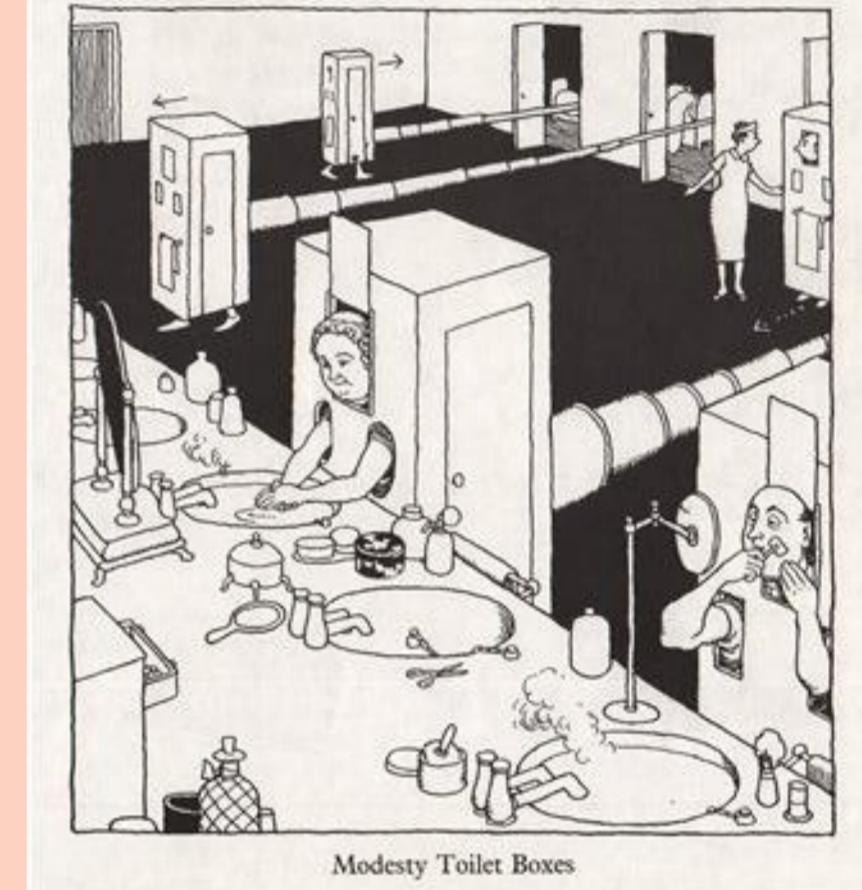


Figure 3 Cultural commentary on sharing: 1930s British illustrator Heath Robinson's 'inventions' satirised the tendency towards incorporating principles of mass production into the home through depictions of futuristic communal life that nevertheless preserve principles of privacy



The Politics and Future of Living Arrangements

Housing and environmental crises mean the future of households remains enormously politically freighted. Struggles between social movements, governments and international institutions implicate radically competing visions for housing markets, debt and patterns of tenure, welfare, and for managing further demographic transition. At the same time, changes and demand for change occur in household arrangements themselves in the tensions and contradictions of daily life. An wider and overarching aim of this Hallsworth project is to document the ongoing struggles, at different levels, over the future of the household (Welch and Yates, under preparation).

References

- Hall, R., Ogden, P. E., & Hill, C. (1997). The pattern and structure of one-person households in England, Wales and France. *International Journal of Population Geography*, 3(2), 161–81.
 Jamieson, L. & Simpson, R., 2013. *Living Alone: Globalization, Identity and Belonging*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
 Keilman, N. (2003). The Threat of Small Households. *Nature*, 421(6922), 489–90.
 Klinenberg, E. (2012). *Going Solo: The Extraordinary Rise and Surprising Appeal of Living Alone*. New York: Penguin.
 Kuznets, S. (1982). Distributions of households by size: Differences and trends. In J. L. Simon & P. H. Lindert (Eds.), *Research in Population Economics* (pp. 1–47). Greenwich: JAI Press.
 Liu, J., Daily, G. C., Ehrlich, P. R., & Luck, G. W. (2003). Effects of household dynamics on resource consumption and biodiversity. *Nature*, 421(January), 530–533.
 Mackellar, F. L., Lutz, W., Prinz, C., & Goujon, A. (1995). Population, Households, and CO₂ Emissions. *Population and Development Review*, 21(4), 849–865.
 Moll, H. C., Noorman, K. J., Kok, R., Engström, R., Throne-holst, H., & Clark, C. (2005). Pursuing More Sustainable Consumption by Analyzing Household Metabolism in European Countries and Cities. *Environmental Studies*, 9(1), 259–275.
 Nishioka, H., Suzuki, T., Yamauchi, M., & Suga, K. (2011). Household Projections for Japan: 2005 – 2030. *The Japanese Journal of Population*, 9(1).
 O'Neill, B., & Chen, B. (2002). Demographic Determinants of Household Energy Use in the United States. *Methods of Population-Environment Analysis*, 28, 53–88.
 Robinson, H (1973). 'Three-man Communal Bath' and 'Modesty Toilet Boxes', in *Heath Robinson Inventions*. London: Duckworth.
 Williams, J. (2007). Innovative solutions for averting a potential resource crisis—the case of one-person households in England and Wales. *Environment, Development and Sustainability*, 9(3), 325–354.
 Yates, L., Warde, A. (2015) The Evolving Content of Meals in Great Britain: Results of a Survey in 2012 in Comparison with the 1950s. *Appetite* 84, p299–308.
 Yates, L. (2015) 'Everyday Politics, Social Practices and Movement Networks: Daily Life in Barcelona's Social Centres'. *British Journal of Sociology*. 18th Jan 2015
 Yates, L., Warde, A. (under review) 'Eating Together and Eating Alone: Meal Arrangements in British Households'. *British Journal of Sociology*
 Yates, L. (under preparation) 'Household Sharing and Consumption: Solo Living, Sustainability and Domestic Economies of Scale'.