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# THE STRUCTURE OF HOUSEHOLDS IN SCANDINAVIA SINCE 1950

*NOTAT*

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THE STRUCTURE OF HOUSEHOLDS IN SCANDINAVIA SINCE 1950.

by

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Abstract

The paper investigates the changing structure of households according to number of persons, number of children and sex and age of head-person. Definitions and their changes are discussed. Mean number of persons per household has decreased from about 3 in 1950 to about 2.5 in 1980. The proportion of one-person households has increased from about 20% to about 30%. The proportion of households with children has decreased from about one half to about one third of the households. The proportion of households headed by a woman has increased from about 20% to about 30%.

(\*)

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## Introduction.

The late forties and fifties witnessed a baby-boom in Scandinavia like elsewhere throughout the industrialized world. The period also experienced an unprecedented long period of steady economic growth lasting into the mid sixties. At about the same time as growth rates started to decline also fertility started its decline.

The households of a society are affected by economic conditions as well as demographic developments. Increasing affluence and changing fertility have both shaped trends in household structure. The most important trend may be the increasing number of one-person households. The main force behind this development is the increasing number of housing units available and the increasing real income available for housing needs. The second most important trend is the decreasing number of children in households with children.

At first blush one might think the baby-boom would lead to an increasing number of children per household. But the baby boom was more a consequence of nearly all women having children than of all women having more children than before. Both the average number of children per marriage and the proportion of marriages with 4+ children has been declining at least since 1920 (Dyrvik 1976). So even if marriages not quite are the same as households the conclusion that the trend of fewer children per household has lasted longer than since 1950 seems safe. The rise of the one-person household obviously led to fewer adults per household as well. Hence the average size of households have been declining steadily from 1950 to 1980 in all Scandinavian countries, most in Finland with a decline from 3.6 to 2.6 and least in Norway with a decline from 3.3 to 2.7. The smallest average size of households is found in Sweden with 2.3 and Denmark 2.4 in 1980 (see table 5).

For the period since 1950 the one-person household has flourished. Will it continue to do so ? We shall not try to answer that question. But our guess is that it will not. The growth of the one-person household has been nourished by several sources. More housing units

and higher income are conditions which have made it possible. But the size and regional distribution of the housing units have subtly reinforced the trend. The higher income necessary for improved standards of living were not available where people lived. They crowded into the cities. Housing units had to be erected. Building smaller housing units, more of them could be built, and they could be provided more rapidly. But of course, the size of the housing unit has some impact on the possible number of members of a household. As economic conditions improved and higher income permitted more room for every member of a household, the more spacious housing units simply were not available. If a household wanted more room, some of its members had to "emigrate". And so they did. Servants and lodgers disappeared. The grown-up, but unmarried, sons and daughters moved out and found their own housing units. The children of parity three or higher became more rare each year.

Yet the one-person households are mostly young persons living alone before they enter into marriage or equivalent unions and old people after their children have moved out and their partners are dead. With increasing age at marriage and postponement of death, one might expect an increasing number of one-person households. But the impact of these developments will probably be more than offset by on the one hand a trend of young persons entering into some kind of trial marriage or collective household and on the other hand by the increasing need for care of one kind or another as a person grows older forcing them either into institutions for professional care or into some kind of collective for mutual care and self-help.

The traditional large households of Scandinavia were based on kinship and economic necessity. Economic necessity is past and kinship has a double edge. Most people today express a desire to have close kin near and within their local community, but not too near and certainly not in the same household. But we think that individual choice of economic expediency and/or the desire to commune with kindred spirits will be sufficient driving forces to stop the decline in size of the households and perhaps also for them to increase a bit.

On the definition of households.

The present study of households in Scandinavia since 1950 is based entirely on the official census publications of the various countries. For the censuses since 1960 the records exist on tapes available for further manipulations and tabulations. At least some and perhaps most of the limitations noted below might thus in principle be overcome. But in most cases the necessary resources for doing this will be lacking even for a single country and in a comparative study like this it will be unthinkable for years to come.

In the official statistics of the Scandinavian countries it usually is easier to find information on families than on households. Why this should be the case is not entirely obvious. But we suspect that the public ideal of the single-family dwelling with the single-family household has much to do with it.

From a macro-economic planning perspective the household has always been the interesting unit compared to the family. The reasons are obvious. It is the household which consumes goods like housing units or consumer durables or food. In anthropology households are very often the units of observation because it is the households which organize the activities necessary for the economic survival of its members and the socialization of its young members. In sociology the household has received little attention compared to the family. Sociological interest has mostly been concerned with sex roles and the social processes of dating, marriage and divorce. For these questions official statistics has interest for the identification of groups with differences in marriage rates and divorce rates. Data on households could not help here.

But as long as statistics about families could be read as statistics about households, the situation for those interested in households was not impossible even though one had to acknowledge some margin for error. During the seventies the situation has rapidly deteriorated as

the traditional family of industrial society started to transform itself. Some suspect it never really existed. Be that as it may, both the users of household statistics and the users of family statistics had problems. A process of rethinking statistical categories started and is still going on. One indicator of this is the number of changes in definitions from one census to the next. But for some of the changes we are hard put to find any reason.

The characteristics of households used most frequently by census takers in Scandinavia are

- number of persons,
- number of children (usually by varying age definitions of children),
- age and sex of head person,
- number of persons with income,
- number of families, and
- housing conditions (usually age and type of house, ownership, number of rooms and utilities like telephone, water, plumbing and method of heating).

Except for number of persons the definitions vary from one country to another and from one point in time to the next. Norway and Denmark change definitions more often than Sweden and Finland. The definitions are summarized in table 1 to 4.

TABLE 1 CENSUS DEFINITIONS OF PRIVATE HOUSEHOLD, FAMILY, HEAD-PERSON AND CHILDREN IN PRIVATE HOUSEHOLDS. DENMARK 1950-1981.

	PRIVATE HOUSEHOLD	FAMILY	HEAD- PERSON	CHILDREN IN THE HOUSEHOLD
1950	Family-households and 1-person households. Any pensioners or lodgers are included where they live.	Not used.	For married couples: the man.	All children living at home.
1960	All members of a housekeeping unit (i.e. owner/renter of dwelling with family, servants and lodgers with common meals). Married couples always constitute a separate household.	Not used.	If a married couple is present: the man. Otherwise the oldest person not considering servants or lodgers.	No definition given.
1965	Like 1960	Not used.	Like 1960	All children and children in care staying in the household regardless of age.
1970	Like 1960	A wide concept of "kinship and family" is used	Not defined. The person who owns or rents the dwelling unit is called "dwelling-owner"	All children and children in care staying in the household regardless of age or marital status
1981	All persons sharing a common dwelling	Married couples with or without children or Cohabiting couples with joint children + any separate children or Single persons with or without children. Children: 0-25y. unmarried.	Not used.	Children less than 26 years staying at home.



TABLE 2 CENSUS DEFINITIONS OF PRIVATE HOUSEHOLD, FAMILY, HEAD-PERSON AND CHILDREN IN PRIVATE HOUSEHOLDS. FINLAND 1950-1980.

	PRIVATE HOUSEHOLD	FAMILY	HEAD- PERSON	CHILDREN IN THE HOUSEHOLD
1950	Persons living in the same dwelling and eating together	Married couple with or without children or a single father or mother with children	The person providing the main income	Unmarried own children and adopted children but not foster children. No age limit.
1960	Like 1950	Like 1950	Like 1950	Not used.
1970	Like 1950	Like 1950	Like 1950	Own children and adopted children, but not foster children, regardless of marital status.
1980	Persons living in the same dwelling	Married or unmarried cohabiting parents and their unmarried children. Single parents with unmarried children Married couples without children	Like 1950	Like 1950



TABLE 3 CENSUS DEFINITIONS OF PRIVATE HOUSEHOLD, FAMILY, HEAD-PERSON AND CHILDREN IN PRIVATE HOUSEHOLDS, NORWAY 1950-1980.

	PRIVATE HOUSEHOLD	FAMILY	HEAD- PERSON	CHILDREN IN THE HOUSEHOLD
1950	Persons living in the same private dwelling and dining together	Persons of the same lineage (kindred)	No definition given. For married couples: usually the man.	Children of the headperson + any grandchildren, children in law and adopted child.
1960	Like 1950	Family-nucleus: married couple with or without unmarried children or father or mother with unmarried children	Usually earner of main income. If children are present usually one of their (its) parents.	Children of the headperson. (*)
1970	Persons registered as living in the same private dwelling	Like 1960 + any single person not belonging to any of the two other groups	Not defined The person who owns or rents the dwelling unit is called "dwelling-owner"	Children of the headperson : all children staying at home without regard of legal status (including adopted and step-children, but not foster children) (*)
1980	Like 1970	Like 1970	Called person of contact : the oldest person in the household	All persons aged 0-15 regardless of relation to person of contact

(\*) Refers in fact to children of families. Tables with households according to number of children were not published (Bugge 1984). See also notes to table 6.

TABLE 4 CENSUS DEFINITIONS OF PRIVATE HOUSEHOLD, FAMILY, HEAD-PERSON AND CHILDREN IN PRIVATE HOUSEHOLDS, SWEDEN 1950-1980.

	PRIVATE HOUSEHOLD	FAMILY	HEAD- PERSON	CHILDREN IN THE HOUSEHOLD
1950	Persons living in the same dwelling unit	Not used.	For married couples: the man, otherwise the most responsible person according to age and occupation.	All children living in the dwelling unit
1960	Like 1950	Cohabiting married couples with or without children 0-15 y. Mother or father with children 0-15 years.	For married couples: the man. Otherwise the person owning or renting the dwelling unit.	All persons 0-15 years living in the dwelling unit.
1965	Like 1950	Not used.	Like 1960	Like 1960
1970	Like 1950	Like 1960 except age of children is 0-17 years.	Like 1960	Like 1960 Also age groups 0-17 and 0-6 are used.
1975	Like 1950	Like 1970	The person owning or renting the dwelling unit	All persons 0-17 years living in the dwelling unit. Also age 0-6 used.
1980	Like 1950	Not used.	Called person of reference. Both of married or cohabiting couples. If no couples are present: the oldest person.	All children of persons living in the dwelling unit regardless of age. Most tables use 0-15, but also 0-17 and 0-6 is used.

In the definition of households Finland and Norway at the start require both a common dwelling and at least one common meal. Denmark introduces this requirement in 1960. Norway abandons the requirement of a common meal in 1970 and Finland and Denmark in 1980. They are then using the definition of a shared dwelling which Denmark used in 1950 and which Sweden has used all the time.

Denmark has, however, added the rule that a married couple always should be counted as a separate household. This will tend to inflate the number of households compared to the other countries. It also tends to blur the distinction between a family and a household.

Except for Denmark before 1980 the definitions of family are mostly comparable in so far as family is used as a statistical category. From 1980 both Denmark and Finland count cohabiting unmarried persons with children as a separate family type. In Sweden from 1975 and in Norway from 1980 some tables include them as a separate category, but they are not generally treated as a type of family. If unmarried cohabitation is excluded as a category and families are used as proxies for households, it will tend to inflate the number of small households compared to countries where unmarried cohabitation is treated as a separate category.

The definitions of head-person are quite varied, but the practical result will mostly be the same person. The man in a married couple, the person registered as owner or renter of the dwelling and the provider of the main income will in most cases be the same person. It is by no means obvious that a household should have a "head-person". But in so far as the identification of this person is without problems his or her characteristics will say much about the social status and probable living conditions of the household. There may, however, be alternative ways of achieving the same by describing all adult members of the household. As far as we know this has never been seriously considered. But some steps toward such considerations seem to have been taken in the 1980 censuses : in Denmark by not defining any head-person, in Norway by calling him or her person of contact, and

again most notably in Sweden by defining person of reference as both the man and the woman in a married or unmarried cohabiting couple (if no cohabiting couple is present : the oldest person). This gives 2025987 more persons of reference than households and comparability with earlier distributions of head-persons is lost. This way of defining the person of reference effectively removes the interest in the sex distribution. It has to be close to 50-50. The age distribution is still interesting. Whether the possibility of using characteristics of the couple to describe the household has been utilized, we cannot say since we lack the full documentation of the Swedish Census of 1980.

The children of a household are not always defined in the same way as the children of a family. In Sweden all children actually living in the household are included. Norway adopts this definition in 1980. Finland for 1950 and 1960 and Norway for 1950, 1960 and 1970 do not publish tables with households according to number of children. The published tables give figures for families or familyhouseholds. The figures presented in table 6 are estimates based on the tables of families. Thus in Norway and Finland, and as far as we can see, probably also in Denmark it is children of the head-person who are included in the household. In this case the household is so close to the family that the distinction between the two is rather less interesting.

On the whole we think Sweden has the most sensible definitions and at least makes the task of investigating the changes after 1950 easiest by having fewest changes in definitions.

The definitions of household characteristics do not always clearly recognize the need to distinguish between the household and the family (or family-nuclei). But they always relate it to the housing unit. A housing unit may be defined as any suitably bounded space within which a household may carry out its on-going activities of living : preparing food and eating, deciding on expenditures, caring for young and old. What the definitions do not recognize is that a household tends to move through a life cycle of its own as the members

have children and grow older.

We will suggest that in any society there will exist a sequence of household types through which a majority of the people of the society will move as they grow older. In Scandinavia today we think the main sequence of households will be something like (Berge and Bugge 1984) :

1. Single person age less than 45.  
From the moment a young person leaves his family of orientation.
2. Unmarried cohabitation. No children. Both persons less than 45 years.
3. Married cohabitation. No children. The woman less than 45 years.
4. Married cohabitation. 1 child. No age limit.
5. Married cohabitation. 2 children. No age limit.
6. Married cohabitation. 3+ children. No age limit.
7. Married cohabitation. No children. The woman 45 years or older.
8. Single person. Age 45 years or older.

In the Norwegian fertility survey of women 18-44 years in 1977, 83% were living in the 6 first types of households. The remaining 17% were evenly distributed among 11 types of households based on number of adults, number of children and number of family nuclei (Berge and Bugge 1984).

Not every household following the main sequence will go through every stage, and at any time a household may leave it for a time maybe to return later. But once a main sequence of household types have been established and accounted for in terms of motivation and behaviour, the interesting problems are the deviations. In terms of the variables used here one may think of four kinds of deviations : 1) single parents, 2) households with more than two adults, 3) unmarried couples with children, and 4) married couples with many children.

Future trends start in deviant behaviour and small numbers. To be

prepared for the future, statisticians do well to consider which deviations might grow to become a major category. We think that living conditions of single parents never will favor them compared to households with two or more adults. On the other hand we think that if we call households with 3 or more adults collectives this may be a type of household with increasing importance (Berge and Bugge 1984). Also unmarried couples with children seems to be a growing category. It certainly has become a socially accepted form of household. Finland and Denmark count them as they would a married couple. For many purposes, however, it is sensible to distinguish between married and unmarried couples. We would suggest that unmarried couples with children should be treated as a separate type of household.

#### On the changing structure of households since 1950

The variations in definitions demonstrated above make comparison of the situation in one country with that of another difficult, but it should not distract our attention from the fact that the main bulk of households are unambiguously identified by the definitions and are the same in all of Scandinavia. In the tables following we shall see that the changes in household structure are the same in all countries. We shall also see that the impact of changes in definitions is notisable, but do not in any way blur the picture of the development.

More serious for our investigation is the lack of characteristics and/or tables presenting them. This is most notable for the family characteristic. Denmark has for the censuses of 1950, 1960 and 1965 and Sweden for the censuses of 1950, 1965 and 1980 not tabulated households according to family types. In addition the distinction between family and household tends to blur when e.g. Denmark defines all married couples to be households. And since we had to use tables of families according to number of children to estimate the distribution of households according to number of children for two censuses in Finland and two in Norway, we decided that a table



presenting the scant information found on households according to types of families would add little of interest.

In the tables 5,6 and 7 we present households according to number of persons, according to number of children and according to sex and age of head-person. Let us first look at table 5.

TABLE 5 PRIVATE HOUSEHOLDS ACCORDING TO NUMBER OF PERSONS . PERCENT .  
AVERAGE NUMBER OF PERSONS PER HOUSEHOLD .

COUNTRY	YEAR	NUMBER OF PERSONS						NUMBER OF HOUSEHOLDS	NUMBER OF PERSONS	PERSONS PER HOUSEHOLD
		1	2	3	4	5	6+			
DENMARK	1950	14	27	23	18	10	8	1330810	4180840	3.1
	1960	20	27	20	18	9	6	1544370	4482660	2.9
	1965	22	27	20	17	8	5	1663270	4664240	2.8
	1970	24	30	18	17	8	4	1800654	4842006	2.7
	1981	29	31	16	16	6	2	2028516	4950988	2.4 *
FINLAND	1950	19	18	19	17	11	17	1121279	3999987	3.6
	1960	22	19	18	16	11	14	1315434	4396398	3.3
	1970	24	22	19	17	9	9	1518819	4540945	3.0
	1980	27	26	19	18	7	4	1781771	4708299	2.6
NORWAY	1950	15	22	23	19	11	8	960330	3134330	3.3
	1960	18	24	21	19	11	8	1138987	3525163	3.1
	1970	21	25	19	18	10	7	1296760	3818591	2.9
	1980	28	26	16	18	8	4	1523508	4046472	2.7
SWEDEN	1950	21	25	23	17	8	6	2385138	6921015	2.9
	1960	20	27	22	18	8	5	2582151	7341471	2.8
	1965	22	28	21	17	7	4	2777674	7624475	2.7
	1970	25	30	19	16	6	3	3050354	7915132	2.6
	1975	30	31	17	15	5	2	3324956	8016498	2.4
	1980	33	31	15	15	5	1	3497801	8132349	2.3

\* The figures exclude households in "summer-houses" and households with no information on housing conditions .

The main result of this table is the steady growth in the proportion of one-person households and the equal steady decline in the proportion of 5 and 6+ person households. In 1950 Denmark with 14% had least one-person households and Sweden with 21% had most. But Denmark increased this proportion most rapidly and was in 1980 second with 29%, 4 percentage points behind Swedens 33%. One and two-person households constituted in 1950 about 40 % of all private households, in 1980 they constitute between one half and two thirds of them. Most of them are grown up people. Hence households with children constitute a clear minority in 1980. From table 6 we see that households with children were a minority already in 1950.



TABLE 6 PRIVATE HOUSEHOLDS ACCORDING TO NUMBER OF CHILDREN . PERCENT .

COUNTRY	YEAR	NUMBER OF CHILDREN	0	1	2	3	4+	NUMBER OF HOUSEHOLDS	AGE OF CHILDREN
DENMARK	1950	56	20	15	6	3		1330810	0-14
	1960	60	18	14	5	2		1544370	0-14 without occupation
	1965	63	11	15	7	4		1663270	0-14 without occupation
	1970	65	16	13	5	2		1800654	0-14
	1981	61	16	17	5	1		2069459	0-25 unmarried
FINLAND	1950	47	21	15	8	9		1121279	0-17 *
	1960	49	19	15	9	8		1315434	0-17 *
	1970	55	19	15	7	5		1518819	0-99 all marital stat.
	1980	62	18	15	4	1		1781771	0-99 unmarried
NORWAY	1950	56	20	14		10		959310	0-15 ***
	1960	42	22	21		16		1138987	0-99 unmarried **
	1970	46	20	19		15		1296760	0-99 unmarried **
	1980	65	15	14		6		1523508	0-15
SWEDEN	1950	60	20	13	5	3		2385138	0-15
	1960	61	19	13	5	2		2582151	0-15
	1965	64	17	12	4	2		2777674	0-15
	1970	67	16	12	4	1		3050354	0-15
	1975	69	15	12	4	1		3324956	0-15
	1980	71	14	12		4		3497801	0-15

\* Estimates based on families .

\*\* Estimates from Bugge (1984) .

\*\*\* Figures refers to "family-households" a somewhat more narrow concept than the ordinary household in that it excludes servants and lodgers from the household .

The story of table 6 is the virtual disappearance of the households with 4 or more children and the decline of the proportion of families with 3 children. But this table also clearly reveals the impact of changes in definitions. When e.g. Denmark increases the age limit of whom they count as children from 14 to 25 years, one shall not be surprised to find the proportion of households with children increasing. The most "child" favoring count of households is however the Finnish census of 1970 where any progeny or equivalent is counted as a "child" in the household without regard of age or marital status. The changing definitions of who is counted as children make the growth in proportions of households without children rather erratic both in Denmark, Finland and Norway. Sweden with a consistent definition of what a child is, also shows a steady increase in the proportion of households without children. We believe the real development in all

Scandinavian countries is comparable to the Swedish even though Sweden will have a bit higher proportion of households without children at all points in time.

TABLE 7 PRIVATE HOUSEHOLDS ACCORDING TO SEX AND AGE OF HEAD-PERSON

COUNTRY	YEAR	SEX : % WOMEN	AGE : PERCENT LESS THAN				NUMBER OF HOUSEHOLDS	
			30	40	45	50 YEARS		
DENMARK	1950	18	-	-	-	-	1330810	*
	1960	20		30		50	1544370	
	1965	22		31		50	1663270	
	1970	23		33		50	1800654	
	1981						2069459	**
FINLAND	1950	25	-	-	-	-	1121279	*
	1960	25		36	46	57	1315434	
	1970	27		35	46	55	1518819	
	1980	35		43	52	61	1781771	
NORWAY	1950	18	10			54	959310	
	1960	18	10	28		50	1138987	
	1970	22	-	-	-	-	1296760	*
	1980	38	13	34	41	47	1523508	
SWEDEN	1950	19		37	45	56	2385138	
	1960	20	9		37		2582151	
	1965	22	11		36		2777674	
	1970	23	15		38		3050354	
	1975	26		34	41	48	3324956	
	1980	53	15	37	45	53	5523768	***

\* No age distribution published

\*\* Head-person not defined

\*\*\* The figures are not comparable to earlier years. For 2025987 married or cohabiting couples there are two persons of reference.

Table 7 presents characteristics of the head-person. If we disregard the problems of defining a head-person, there are still problems of comparability because of the many ways of presenting information on age. Sex is easier. If you present information on it at all, you will at least have the same definitions as others.

The proportion of female head-persons has been increasing roughly at the same pace in all Scandinavian countries. Finland was in 1950, however, on a higher level than the other countries with 25% of the households headed by a woman compared to the 18-19% in the other countries. Most of the increase has come since 1970. It seems reasonable that postponement of marriage and increases in divorce rates like those we observed during the seventies should increase the

number of households headed by females. But also changes in definitions and even more important : changes in attitude, must have affected the count of female head-persons. One result of the debate on sexual discrimination is that more and more people do not take it for granted that if there is a man in the household, he also has to be the head-person. A dramatic impact of a new definition is seen for Sweden in 1980 where 53% of the persons of reference are women. Here the figure clearly is incomparable to the figures for earlier years. Norway also changed definition from 1970 to 1980 and the jump in the proportion of head-persons who are women is to some degree caused by this.

The age distributions of head-persons are more difficult to compare. The age categories used in the published tables vary from country to country and from time to time if tables on head-persons according to age are published at all. But for all countries it seems as if the proportion of young head-persons has been increasing. This is consistent with the decreasing age at marriage during the fifties and sixties and the increasing number of young single persons establishing their own households during the seventies.

#### Conclusion.

We have in the present paper tried to focus on the comparability of households and household characteristics in the Scandinavian countries. It did not take us far. Even for a characteristic like age of head-person comparability is close to breakdown. For others like family relations it is non-existent. If we instead had tried to describe the situation in each country with no regard for comparability we might have commented in more detail on some more characteristics (e.g. housing conditions) or some type of households (e.g. households with children). But even so the comparability across time tends to be poor. If census takers could grant but one wish, we would settle for comparability across time within the same country.

There are aspects of the development of households not covered by

public statistics, and left out by us, which also merit comment. In particular we think on the division of labour within the household and the use of time within the household by different members. Some information exist (see e.g. Grønmo and Lingsom 1982). But again comparability and information on development since 1950 is close to non-existent. If the list of wishes to be granted by census takers could be expanded, we would suggest that household division of labor and household time budgets be considered for inclusion.

The main conclusion, however, is clear and undisputable. The development in household structure is very similar in all Scandinavian countries. Everywhere households are having fewer members. There is more single person households, more are without children and more are headed by females.

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