

The Sociology of Personal Life: Living Alone

Sociology of Personal Life is a Year 1 course unit in Sociology at The University of Manchester with approximately 400 students.

In collaboration with the course unit convenor, Professor Sue Heath, ESSTED developed a tutorial about living alone or single living.

Using data from the UK social survey Understanding Society, we compiled a series of tables giving insight into the characteristics of those living alone compared to those living in other household arrangements.

The empirical evidence, along with the theoretical background provided by the lecture and tutorial reading, supports discussion of stigma, stereotypes and social norms and how they connect with gender and life stage. Additionally, students can be encouraged to question the relationship between theory and empirical evidence and how we can investigate the social world.

An introduction to quantitative research

The tutorial introduces first year students to quantitative data as an integral part of sociological study. With the example of Understanding Society, students learn about survey research and how survey data is available to researchers through the UK Data Service.

Developing quantitative skills

Students learn and apply core quantitative concepts and skills that used to read the story of a table or graph, including:

- How to decipher a table using the table title, the row and column headings and any footnotes
- Terminology such as sample size, frequencies and variables
- The use of ratios and percentages to compare groups
- How to examine the table cells, especially the difference between row and column percentages
- Students could be shown how to calculate ratios as a tool for making comparisons.

Learning and applying these quantitative skills provides students with a base in which to engage with the quantitative evidence they come across during their degree programme and sets the foundations for learning more complex quantitative skills in methods courses.

Course Aims and objectives

To introduce students to a sociological approach to the study of personal life

To examine how personal lives have changed over time and in relation to social changes

To explore how wider social changes have impacted upon personal life

To provide conceptual tools for understanding the micro level of day-to-day

On completion of the unit successful students will:

be able to understand the relationship between personal experience and wider social phenomena

be able to understand how the 'present' is rooted in the past

have knowledge of the interconnections between issues of biography, sexuality, place, home, and other areas defined as 'personal' have an appreciation of why and how the individual is important to the study of sociology

Critical skills

The tutorial supports critical reflection of observed patterns and how to relate empirical data to theoretical ideas. For example, the data shows that those living alone show averagely lower life satisfaction. Students can be asked to reflect on this pattern and develop theoretical explanations, considering both direct and indirect reasons.

These types of critical reflection help introduce first year students to analytical concepts such as the difference between association and causality with reference to real data and a substantive theme.

Students can be asked to critically reflect on the measurement and categorisation of living arrangements, socio-economic classifications and concepts such as life satisfaction.

There is opportunity to introduce the concept of statistical significance with a focus on conceptual understanding and interpretative skills, rather than technical or statistical skills.

For example, the data shows there is a small but statistically significant association between 'living alone' and 'frequency of talking with neighbours'. However, we can question the substantive significance of such a relationship since

- a. The differences are only small
- b. What does the variable 'frequency of talking with neighbours' measure? Would an alternative variable offer more meaningful results?
- c. Might it be more insightful to examine differences by age or gender?

Further Resources

- Tutorial on Living Alone: Tutorial Discussion points and Tutor notes (word document) and supporting Data (Excel file)
- Course unit outline (PDF) and Example exam paper (word)
- The Understanding Society website provides detailed information about the survey and friendly summaries of key findings and short videos.
(<https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/>)
- Understanding Society and a wealth of other survey data can be accessed through the UK Data Service (<http://ukdataservice.ac.uk/>)

About this resource

'The Sociology of Personal Life: Living Alone' was developed by the ESSTED team in collaboration with Professor Sue Heath the convenor of The Sociology of Personal Life at the University of Manchester.

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<http://www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/essted/>

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