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ON THE STUDY OF HOUSEHOLDS: SOME METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS ON THE USE OF HOUSEHOLD DATA*

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Abstract It is argued that instead of trying to use the complex everyday concept of household, one should record the various characteristics which go into this concept. From a systems perspective nine ways of characterising households as analytical units are identified. The distinction between absolute, distributional and relational data is, together with the distinction between three levels of characterising the household, used to discuss the utility of concepts like 'class-position of household', 'head of household', 'Minimal Household Units' and kinship-based typologies of household.

Introduction

When people talk about family, marriage or household, they often use the concepts interchangeably. Since they in fact are facets of the same piece of reality, the context of everyday language makes this both permissible and understandable. Yet this seeming natural clarity of the concepts and the familiarity, which every competent user of a language has with the content of them, may create problems both for the professional statistician collecting information and the student seeking to understand the complexities of family life or household behaviour.

An apt illustration of the existing confusion in terminology is the statistical category of 'one-parent families' which contains both the true one-parent families where one of the parents is deceased as well as the one-parent households where the parents are divorced and living in separate households. Parent is a category describing a social relationship rather than meaning just 'responsible adult' which the statistical use of the term might suggest. But the real problem lies in the interchangeable use of family and household.

The present paper will discuss these problems with reference to the problems facing the theoretically informed student who wants to collect relevant information on households and the changing nature of households in present-day society. The comments grew out of an attempt to study processes of change in Norwegian households (Bugge 1984; Berge and Bugge 1984, 1985), which was to a large degree thwarted because of inadequacies of the available statistical information.

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Problems with the everyday concept of household

The concept of a household belongs to everyday language. We all think we will recognise a household when we see one. We think of a housing unit, a family and maybe one or a few additional persons. But concepts such as 'a household', taken from a cultural heritage, never are easily and straightforwardly applicable in social science.

For census takers the first problem appears already at the boundary of the household: does a particular person belong to the household or not? Even if we all should recognise a household when we see the core of it, the real-life households seem to be rather 'fuzzy sets', where it might be more appropriate to think in terms of degree of membership rather than in terms of an all or nothing relation.

The solution to the problem of membership all too often is to find a feasible definition according to constraints posed by economy and research problem. The result is that data from two different sources are incomparable or comparable only at the most general level. Even so, the ambiguous and arbitrary nature of many definitions used for collecting data may not be the largest problem faced by the users of them.

In the analysis of household data the apparent simplicity of the concept seems to have enticed more than one student to abandon the careful theoretical groundwork needed to clarify exactly what is done when household or family data are utilised. The study of gender and stratification may be one case in point (Crompton and Mann 1986). Most authors seem to use family or household or conjugal family as synonyms (see e.g. Goldthorpe 1983, and the literature he refers to). One argument is about whether the family is the basic unit of social stratification, another is whether the position in the occupational system of the head of the family (usually the male) may be used to determine the position of his family in the stratification system. Goldthorpe (1983) appears to conclude that the stratification system of families is the same as the stratification system of men. Not every reasonable theoretical model of society would suggest that this is the case. We shall return to this question later.

The problems faced both by the collectors of information on households and the students trying to interpret them are closely connected with the theoretical and practical purposes of collecting or studying the information in the first place. This means that in general there is no single 'right' way of doing it. If this is accepted, there are two ways of approaching the problem of defining 'a household'. One way to go about the task is to put the concept into an analytical and theoretical framework to determine the elementary observations which may go into the concept. The other approach is to review the possible uses of household data to find the most widely useful definition. The latter approach will not be taken here. Nevertheless, the broad interest of household data for social science should be noted.

Data on households contribute to our understanding of the distribution of income and quality of life, as well as the flow of resources among various groups and the distribution of power between the sexes. The most important

task of a household is maybe to provide security for and distribute welfare among its members. It also provides the immediate environment for family life and the procreation and socialisation of new members of the society. The broad relevance of data on households is perhaps the main reason that the minimal and widely applicable definition has become progressively harder to find. The increasing interest in household data has been accompanied by radically diverging professional interests. This is one problem official statistics have to confront. It is difficult to imagine that any one simple definition of household would satisfy all interests.

It should also be noted that the historical development of our societies has transformed the households along with everything else. From peasant households via the patriarchal industrial worker family households to the latter day two-income service worker families in their one-family housing units, the conditions for the traditional tasks of the households have changed in more than a few ways. The transformations are not always obvious, but may nevertheless rapidly make our easy to grasp everyday definitions useless, if not directly harmful, to users of the data. The concept of the head of the household may be taken as an example.

So far statisticians collecting data on households (or families) and their heads seem not to have been unduly troubled by questions of exactly what such data tell about households and what kind of assumptions are needed in order to interpret the data as data on households at all (but see Leiulfsrud and Woodward 1987). We shall return to this problem below.

Today an effort seems to be required both towards theoretical clarification of the concept and towards collecting data flexible enough to accommodate various theoretical approaches. Only if the household concept is analytically dissected and data on its various parts collected, will it be possible to utilise household data to their full potential.

The identification of households as analytical units

The household may be considered as a social system with a boundary identifying it as a meaningful unit for activities and relations. This unit is positioned within a social structure and contributes to various social processes. The household is then seen as composed of units like individual persons, families or MHUs (Minimal Household Units: see Ermisch and Overton 1985). These units define an internal structure of the household and will be agents of processes internal to it which may maintain or transform its internal structure, add new dimensions of characteristics or alter old ones.

The household considered as an analytical unit poses two problems: one is to identify the members of the household. The other is to determine at what point in time a household ceases to exist. Or more precisely: how large are the changes in a household which can be accepted before one has to consider it a new household.

Membership in households

One of the fundamental characteristics of a social system is its location in space and the nature of this locality. The obvious and immediate locality of the household is the housing unit. But not everyone who enters a housing unit is a

member of the resident household and members who leave the housing unit do not automatically lose their membership. The boundary of a household system should be conceptualised as culturally defined rather than spatially.

Sometimes the sub-units of the household act in the capacity of being members of the household, at other times they do not. The question then is who acts in the capacity of being a member and under what circumstances? Among those who act in the capacity of being a member of a particular household, some do it more often than others. Would it be useful to distinguish degrees of membership? Perhaps the head of a household is the person who most often acts in the capacity of being a member of the household rather than the person earning most money? Unfortunately a degree of membership does not seem easy to observe. But various approximations might be suggested: from self-reporting to a comparison of *de facto* and *de jure* populations of housing units.

Maybe the most easily obtainable approximation to the question of a graded membership is to ask how many nights each potential member spends within each housing unit. That way the household is linked with the housing unit and also with the definitions of households currently in use which defines the household as consisting of the persons living in the same dwelling, sometimes with the added requirement of a shared meal (see Berge and Bugge 1985). Current definitions probably are good approximations to what one might find if graded memberships were to be studied.

Most individuals in a society spend most of their time sleeping within the same housing unit as the household they are registered as being a member of. But the changes our societies have experienced have to an increasing degree made people move about through commuting and job requirements. Also, prolonged adolescence has made more people maintain 'dual' bedrooms. If that trend goes on, the present approximations will become less and less useful.

A second approach to the concept of graded membership might come from data on the pooling of resources: who contributes what share to the household budget. The requirement of a shared meal for being member of a household is symbolic of shared resources, but says, unfortunately, nothing about the degree of contribution. Here it is easy to fall down on income data as a proxy for the degree of contribution. But the time contributed by the housewife is just as valuable to the household as the income contributed by the working man. In order to make a fair assessment one would need both time data and data on incomes.

One solution might be to take declarations of belonging to a household at face value with additional questions about incomes and time spent at home both during days and nights to assess the degree of membership.

The stability of households

If one conceptualises households as social systems, one also accepts a second basic characteristic of social systems: they possess an existence and identity through time independent of any particular member. Their identity comes from a shared culture expressed, e.g. in life-style, language, occupation(s), resource base etc. The household culture will change as members change. But it seems a

reasonable supposition that the larger the household is in the number of members and the stronger its resource base is, the more stable it will be.

Many problematic cases consist of households with one conjugal family where divorce causes the man to move out. If the man continues to pay alimony and child support, his former wife and their children may be able to continue living in the same housing unit. In this case it might be argued that the same household continues to exist even though a family has broken up into two new ones, but causing only one new household to be established. In this case the husband would be counted as part member of the resource base of his former household. If he were to leave it completely, and his wife and their children had to move into another housing unit with associated changes in life-style etc., I think one could argue that a new household had been created.

The criteria for deciding on the life or death of a household will, however, need considerably more precision to be of help in large-scale data collection. Again the best procedure may be to rely on people's own views of the situation.

Characteristics of households seen as analytical unit

A systematic approach to the definition of characteristics of households might start by introducing a multi-level systems perspective (see Berge 1980 and 1982).

By distinguishing between SUPER-UNIT, UNIT and SUB-UNIT, we see that a study of households should focus not only on the household, but also on the characteristics of the super-units of households to determine if they represent important contexts the households have to take account of in their behaviour. Likewise we must investigate the characteristics of sub-units to see if these characteristics may be said to represent conditions for households responding to the various contexts within which they are found. Thus we should consider, in addition to the direct characteristics of households, also contextual and conditional characteristics.

The units of any system level can be described in at least three distinctive ways (adapted from Lazarsfeld and Menzel 1972). First, there are the absolute characteristics. These are the simple classifications determining the presence or absence of some characteristic. In addition to absolute data we have what I will call network data and distributional data. Units at one system level may be connected with each other in various ways constituting a network. The position within such a network represents a type of data very different from the absolute data. And, finally, any classification of the units at one level may be taken to define a social grouping with a distribution of the members across the possible categories. For any such distribution a particular unit has a relative location index. The position within a distribution represents a third way of characterising units.

If we now cross-classify three system levels: super-unit, unit and sub-unit, with three basic types of data: absolute, distributional and relational, we get nine ways of characterising the household. Table 1 presents examples of these nine types of household data.

When considering households, the super-units are all kinds of analytical units which contains households as a member unit. The obvious candidates to consider are the neighbourhood and the local community. Direct observation of these units

gives absolute characteristics of them. Particularly, if the observed characteristics do not have any obvious analogue at the household level, they may be easy to overlook if one only confines attention to households. The neighbourhood may be rural or urban in terms of population density and land use pattern, not the household. But the rural/urban distinction may be important to some aspect of household behaviour. If that is seen to be a possibility, one should record it as a contextual characteristic of the household. The household may be living in a welfare state providing free education. This might be interesting if one compares households from different countries with different educational systems.

Super-units like neighbourhoods or communities obviously have positions in distributions and may be members of various types of networks like any other types of units. If the community of the household is among the 10 per cent with highest average income or if it is located at the periphery of the national economy (or the state at the periphery of the world economy), it may be of interest to record this as contextual characteristics of the households we are observing.

Looking at the household directly qua analytical unit, one realises that there are rather few characteristics which are not derived from either super-units or sub-units. Nevertheless, illustrative examples are not hard to find. It is, for

Table 1
Examples of Nine Ways to Characterise a Household

Level	Type of data		
Characteristics	Absolute data from observation of unit	Distributional data from social groupings	Relational data from networks
Contextual characteristics from super-units	Urban or rural neighbourhood	Community is among the 10% with highest income.	State is located located at the periphery of the world economy.
Direct characteristics of households	Degree of division of labour	Among the 5% with most living area per person in the household.	A kinship oriented social network.
Conditional characteristics based on sub-units	Two-income households	Average score of employed persons in the household on a status index for occupations.	Paternalistic-authoritarian power relation.

instance, possible for a household to have a division of labour or a decision rule (e.g. concerning the collective consumption of the members of the household) not comparable to either of what the sub-units or the super-units have. The degree of division of labour or the characteristics of the decision rule is then an absolute characteristic of the household.

Looking at the networks maintained by the household qua household, like the exchange of meal or domestic services, one might characterise these as family/kinship oriented or individual/friendship oriented. But characteristics of units based on relational data are hard to find. Both formal and substantive theories of relational structures are in need of further work (Seidman 1987).

Most characteristics of households will be based on the categories of the distributions one wants to explore, e.g. what is the size of its housing unit if one wants to know how many households have big houses, or how many kilos of sugar are consumed if one is concerned with the nutritional standard of different households.

Quite analogous to the way we have discussed various types of characteristics of households, the various sub-units of the household may be given characteristics. And for every way of characterising the sub-units, we may define a distribution of the sub-units within a household. The characteristics of this distribution are also characteristics of the household. They represent conditions for the behaviour of the households. Classifying the members of a household as either adults or children, the number of children and the number of adults will be characteristics of the household.

There are also relations of various kinds between members of the household. These relations define a network within the household and the properties of this network are also properties of the household. The power relations may be authoritarian or the status hierarchy paternalistic. Finally, the absolute characteristics of sub-units may be used to construct typologies of households. One might, for example, characterise households according to number of MHUs or one might count the number of members gainfully employed to characterise the household as one-, two- or three-or-more income household. A typology of class impact on households, based on occupational class positions of gainfully employed members of the households, could also be constructed.

Today the direct and conditional characteristics based on absolute or distributional data are most common. Contextual data are seldom recorded in any form. One reason is the lack of variation which often is the case within one system. Without variation there is no way of utilising the information. But to monitor time trends and to do comparative studies of several societies it would be important to also record unvarying contextual characteristics.

Data on networks are seldom utilised as such. Information on kinship, in so far as it is recorded, is seldom thought to define a network with properties which may vary from household to household. Conditional data is recorded extensively, but any clear distinction between direct data on households and conditional data based on sub-units is not utilised. Hence data referring to sub-units often are treated as if they were direct data on households.

The three types of data and the three levels of utilising the data should sensitise us to the possible complexity of household data. And it might prove helpful in

taking a closer look at what we do when we use concepts like head of household or classify households according to number of generations present.

The occupation of the 'head of household' as indicator of family class position

The 'head of household' or 'the male head of household' appears often and in very different contexts. One theoretically important place is class and stratification theory.

We should first note the differences between the household and the nuclear family (as defined by the UN). While the family concerns sex and procreation, the household is concerned with consumption and reproduction of everyday life. While the two are intrinsically linked in the real world, they should be theoretically separated in order to guide the collection and interpretation of data. Only in a situation where the overwhelming majority of households are one-family households will the interchangeable use of the terms family and household cause no problems for the collection and interpretation of data. In the Western developed world during the last couple of generations most households have been one-family households. But for most of the rest of the world, and even for most of our own history, a substantial minority have lived in multi-family or extended households. In France and England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries from 10 to 50 per cent of households are classified as multi-family or extended (Flandrin 1976).

However, for the sake of argument, let us assume we are dealing with a society exclusively with one-family households. Then the 'conventional view' of women and class analysis represented by Goldthorpe (1983) maintains:

1. that the main unit of stratification in our society is the family, and
2. that the class position of this unit is best measured by the occupation of the male head (or possibly by the head – to include families with no male head).

To dispute the first assumption is not the point here, even though it could be suggested that there may be some differences between causes and effects of stratification. If status is the effect of stratification and class the cause, then families may well be the unit distributing the benefits without being the unit relevant for the study of class. Or, in other words, families may be the relevant unit for stratification studies if one is interested in the consumption of the results of stratification (both good and bad), but be quite inappropriate as a unit of study if one is interested in the causal processes producing these results.

And, moreover, if one is interested in the consumption of the results of stratification, the occupation of the male head may be both an appropriate and good indicator of the position of the family in relation to the consumer market. It may even also be plausibly argued that after the brief (historically speaking) transitional period between a society of one-income families and a society of two-income families, the occupation of the head of the family is just as good an indicator of the opportunities for life-style and standard of living of the family as a combined index of the incomes and occupational opportunities of both spouses.[1]

On the other hand, if one is more interested, as we shall be for the rest of this

discussion, in those aspects of the class position[2] which indicate the position of the family in the relations of production, the argument for the family as the basic unit of study is tenuous. Even more so is the argument for the occupation of the head as the best indicator of the link between family and class position.

Let us here, for the sake of argument, assume that families are the relevant units for the study of class. Exactly what does it mean to use 'the head of the family' as indicator of its class position without qualification? According to the scheme above, the class position of the male head of a family should be considered as conditional data on the family. It is relevant to the behaviour of the family, but not generally equivalent to a class position for the family.

The individual is mapped into a class position according to position in an occupational system. Since families do not have occupations in the same sense as individuals, one might try to think of analogous relational data one could use to determine its position in the system of relations of production. Except for land holding and the relation of the family to land use, I am hard put to see any possible candidates for this task. It would seem very difficult to establish any equivalence between class based on occupation and class based on land holding and land use. Only if we are able to establish a system of relations where families qua families are units, and we are able to establish that the class character of this system is equivalent to the class character of the system of occupations of heads of families, can we conclude that the occupations of heads of families in general are appropriate indicators of the class position of families. If we cannot do this, the class position of the head of the family will be a conditional datum on the family on par with the occupation of the spouse of the head.

For the general case we must conclude that assuming the occupation of the head of household is the best indicator of the class position of the family is an untenable assumption. However, particular models of the family may be constructed where it may be a proper indicator.

The traditional family model of stratification studies

The following two assumptions about the family would seem to be required to be true if the occupation of the man is to be used as indicator of class position of his family:

1. The family units must be stable. Only the death of a head-person should destroy it. This has to do with the possibility of studying social mobility. The occupational careers of head-persons take place in the context of a family. Unless the head-person lives within the same family throughout his or her career, the mobility of the family cannot be connected to it.
2. Only one person in the family, the head-person, should hold an occupation. In that case one can argue that in a stable family the head-person embodies the family link to the occupational system.

From these two assumptions a third one may easily be inferred. If one considers the everyday concept of 'head-person', given that families are dissolved only by the death of the head and with the head of the family as the only one gainfully employed, many people would assume that within such families there will be

found an umpire – the patriarch – who decides on collective actions for the household. The patriarch is positioned at the top of a certain kind of network of dominance/subordination relations, and the distribution of resources among members of the household is usually highly skewed in favour of him. The family model of stratification studies, by being traditional, easily implies an additional assumption about a patriarchal decision rule. This assumption is, however, not necessary to the central thesis of the model: that the class position of the family is determined by the occupation of the head-person.

The description of the traditional model of stratification studies sounds surprisingly like a description of the classical nuclear family of Western nostalgia (to use a phrase from Goode 1963). Given its ideological status, it is, perhaps, no wonder that it has gained such widespread adherence also among students of stratification. That it also, for some short spell, was almost true, helps explain its initial success.

In a situation with very little variation in the three above mentioned characteristics going into the family model, which usually will be the case when assumptions (1) and (2) above are satisfied, it ought to be both a powerful and useful model. But when more and more households start to deviate significantly from the main type, it becomes less and less helpful to lump together characteristics in this way.

Problems of the traditional model of the family

Consider a case, not unknown these days (see e.g. the case of O'Brien vs. O'Brien described by Swan 1986), where a young couple starts out with the man going to college and the woman working to support them both. After completing college and a career successfully launched the couple divorces. If now the man were to remarry a successful colleague just before the census records them as a two-career family with the occupation of the woman in the same class as the occupation of the man, how should we conceptualise the class position of the man in relation to that of his families? Can one maintain that the family is the unit which is mobile? Using individual indicators as proxies for family indicators will rapidly run into the problem of what to do when families dissolve and transform into new families.

Most of the dissolved families to date have been dissolved by the death of the man. Thus the first assumption of the family model of stratification studies has been defensible. But the number of families dissolved by divorce is rapidly increasing.

The difficulties of finding a family definition which makes it possible to trace the life course of a family in a theoretically meaningful way have turned out to be a real problem for the 'Panel Study of Income Dynamics' (Duncan and Morgan 1985). They find that the solution 'is to track individuals through time and specify what family they are in at any point' (ibid.: 53).

One reason for the difficulties may be that this study – as most others – is really more interested in individuals than in families. If one is really interested in families qua families, it should not be too disturbing to contemplate the 'death' of a family and the 'birth' of one or two new families as individuals die or leave

an existing family. The trouble is that what really is of interest is the standard of living of the people in the various types of families as they change throughout the life course of the individuals.

On the other hand, if one is interested in households, and I think one could argue that Duncan and Morgan really are studying households, it would, according to the scheme presented previously, be reasonable to define the household as a cultural and social system with a core resource base and sufficient stability of membership for it to continue as a meaningful entity despite changes in membership. In a household model with graded membership a divorced man paying alimony and/or child support would still be counted as a (part) member because of his contribution to the resource base of the household. As long as fractional membership adds up to one, multiple memberships should pose no insoluble problems for the analysis.

But for studies of stratification, the instability of families and the difficulty of identifying the 'same' family through time is crucial. A conditional datum on the family, like the occupation of one of its members, can no longer serve as proxy for the class position of the family since it is in no way tied to the existence of the family.

When assumptions of models become inappropriate, which often seems to be the fate of models uncritically picked up from everyday language, they must be abandoned and the model reworked with more general and flexible assumptions. Instead of despairing of the problems encountered in data collected by the outdated model of the traditional family, one ought to split the head of household concept as well as the household concept into their constituent parts. Then we may compare households with different decision rules (is the household an actor system or is it not?), households with different kinds of power relations (degree of equality in conjugal relations), and households with different internal resource distributions (how skewed are they?).

Head of households and headship rates

Rather different from the discussion of family class positions and, perhaps, of more practical implication is the 'headship' rate used in projections of housing needs.

The headship rate, as it is employed today to predict the need for housing units, uses in reality nothing of the old 'everyday' concept of the head of household. The headship rate used in calculations is just a count of households per individual in various social groupings. As such it is a contextual characteristic of the individuals of the different social groupings. It is based on a typology of household membership relations (the person is or is not head, or oldest or highest income earner or reference person or marker person) in the various groupings, and the units of comparison are the social groupings. The headship rate says nothing about the households of a society and does not need any data on who is the head of a household in the everyday meaning of the concept. Yet, the need for headship rates seems to be an argument for registering heads of households. The only reason I can think of why this should be so, is the name: headship rates. Who says language is unimportant?

The distance between reality and projections of the number of households of various types by means of the headship rate method have generally been too large for the projections to be helpful. It has been assumed that one reason for this is the problematic nature of the implicit assumptions in the concept of head of household and various alternative ways of constructing rates have been proposed (e.g. Linke 1984). The most general index of this kind is the contribution index proposed by Murphy (1986) which is based on the propensity of all persons in a grouping to contribute to households of various types (the index value for population grouping i = the sum for all households j of the number of persons from grouping i in household j divided by total number of persons in household j). Murphy shows that by weighting the index i in various ways, one finds the headship rate and various other proposed rates as special cases of the contribution index. If his terminology and approach to modelling household rates is adopted, one may hope that the 'headship period' is over.

In the task of making projections of the number of households, it seems to have been implicitly assumed that one needed data on households. Yet one ended up with a headship rate method which did not utilise household data as such. With Murphy's contribution index this is made explicit. The real problem, however, has not been solved. A theoretical understanding of the processes shaping the formation, development and dissolution of households is still missing. Even if it is possible to make projections of numbers of households without data on households, there seems to be no reason to expect improvements in the projections arising only from improvements in the flexibility of computing household rates. The essential task not confronted even by the contribution index method is to define the population groupings for which household rates have to be computed. And that is where the theoretical problems of household processes return to the task of making projections. Whether household rates of the contribution index type or models based on real household data in the end will provide the best projections remains to be seen. In either case a lot of household data needs to be collected and studied.

Typologies of households based on kinship or number of generations

A study of relations among members in Norwegian households found that 91 per cent of the households were of four simple types: families with children, couples without children, single parents with children and single persons. The last 9 per cent of the households were distributed among 42 other types. The typology was based on data on generation and kinship relations, but not on the number of persons (Gulbrandsen and Ås 1986). The development during the last couple of generations is, however, unknown. There is no easily available data to ascertain if the number of simple households was less, say, in 1930. It would not be wholly unreasonable to suppose that it was. But what does it really mean if that were the case?

Typologies of households based on kinship use characteristics of the internal kinship networks. The number of generations in a household may, for example, be associated with the value system, the standard of living, and the resource

base of the household. Without changes in any of these it may be possible that, for example, changes in the way housing is supplied (large-scale industrial production of dwellings in standard sizes and qualities), may lead the household to rearrange its living quarters so that they occupy more than one housing unit.

If enumeration procedures are unchanged, the census – as well as other surveys – will show a change in the household structure in terms of numbers of generations. One would, for example find an increase in the number of simple households. The researcher may be tempted to conclude that either the value system or the standard of living or the resource base of the households have changed, when in reality what has happened is that the households have adapted to a changed environment in order to preserve their value system, standard of living and resource base. That the value system, the standard of living and the resource base also change and that the changes interact only underscores the necessity of detailed comprehensive data on households, and preferably with kinship relations included.

One should also note that the kinship approach to the definition of the household sees the household as a socio-cultural system tied to a particular resource base and independent of any exact membership. It is thus one definition of household which avoids the problem of instability over time due to changes in membership.

What constitutes a child in a household?

The child-parent relationship (in particular the child-mother relation) is the strongest social relation known and the building block of kinship networks. There is still no consensus on how to recognise a child in household surveys.

One census may define children in a household functionally with regard to the larger society. Being a child is a characteristic of the relation from a household member to the contextual social system. This corresponds to imposing an age limit on children in their definition. In another census children are defined by the child relationship in the internal kinship network. Being a child is a characteristic of the relation from a household member to other household members. This corresponds to not using an age limit on the definition of children. To distinguish between the two dimensions and to record both is of course the sensible thing to do.

Minimal Household Units (MHUs)

Recently Ermisch and Overton (1985) have recommended that studies of household formation ought to be based on the Minimal Household Unit (MHU). How do MHUs relate to the terms we have been using so far?

Ermisch and Overton define four types of MHU: (1) single persons, (2) single parents with children, (3) married couples without children, and (4) married couples with children. It should first be noted that this definition of MHU is very close to the UN's recommended definition of the conjugal family with the category of single persons added. The differences consist of the UN's distinction between married and unmarried couples with children, which Ermisch and

Overton do not recognise, and the age limit on children, which Ermisch and Overton require, but the UN definition does not recognise. Since it is difficult to collect data on unmarried couples in any regular fashion, they are very rarely included in official statistics. Age, however, usually is easily available. Tabulations of families according to age of children are commonly found. Hence many statistical tables on families can be read as statistics on MHUs.

What Ermisch and Overton have done is to choose a definition of the conjugal family where children are defined functionally with regard to the society. To this they have added a category of single persons and one basic assumption about the decision function of this type of unit: that 'the unit would attempt to maximise its benefits from a given set of alternatives' (Ermisch and Overton 1985: 36). The result is perhaps best described as an actor model.

In the study of formation, development and dissolution of households, the use of MHUs as units of analysis means that the propensity of MHUs to form separate households can be studied as a function of the characteristics of the members of the MHU. The choice of co-residence with other MHUs can be seen as determined by the characteristics of the environment of the MHUs in interaction with their resources.

In terms of the classifications proposed here, Ermisch and Overton have chosen to model the household as a non-actor system with the sub-units, the MHUs, as the actors providing the dynamic to the system. This is precisely the kind of theoretical approach to the modelling of households which the headship rate method – as well as the contribution index method – has shied away from. And as such it is a step in the right direction.

The next step must be to question if it is enough to graft a variant of the 'economic man model' onto a family typology to get a helpful theory. Presumably the kinship based multi-MHU households constitutes the majority of multi-MHU households. Even if historical development has increased the power of MHUs to the detriment of the patriarch, there may still be found enough multi-MHU households with some kind of decision-making procedures that it would be worthwhile both to record decision rules of households as well as of MHUs and to compare households with a decision rule to households without.

In other words, I am suggesting that the model might be most rapidly improved by questioning its most distinctive and perhaps also most simple-minded assumption: the maximisation of benefits. Perhaps one ought to consider what little is known of decision-making within families (Mitterauer and Sieder 1982; Pahl 1984) as well as households (Chayanov 1966; Sahlins 1972). Maybe neither the decision rules nor the behaviour of married couples with children change very much as the children pass the age limit where the household is transformed from a single-MHU to a multi-MHU household.

Conclusion

From an analytical exercise like this it seems to the author that the implications for the definition of the household are rather plain. Different concepts are appropriate for the various purposes of researchers. The sensible approach must be to compose the key concepts in order to record their constituent parts. That will

give a far more versatile data base without sacrificing possibilities of comparison with earlier recordings. This will also point up the differences between earlier records and our own. For example, it can show how the uncritical acceptance of the everyday language concept of the household has contributed to disguising the changing nature of the relation between the household and the productive system, and how this has had consequences for both the internal structure of the household and its observable behaviour.

The problems of collecting the various types of data varies, and particularly for some kinds of relational data they may be large. Yet, the major obstacle to a more versatile data base on households is perhaps not the problems of the census or survey registration of relational data. But rather, the very limited ability, both theoretically and practically, presently existing to handle relational data in large quantities. Some necessary analytical steps have been taken in network analysis (see e.g. Frank 1978; Burt 9180; Seidman 1987), but computational algorithms with easy access to necessary computational power are still uncommon.

Notes

1. Assuming other things equal, the argument will be based on the propensity of the housing market to absorb virtually all extra buying power, increasing the incomes of real property owners, but leaving the vast majority of households just as 'rich', in terms of buying power, as they were in the system of one-income families. The transition will have some interesting distributional consequences, pointing to changes in the meaning of occupation, and, in the long term, with an assumption of no growth in the population, consequences for the importance of inheritance, pointing to a possible decline in the correlation between occupation and market position.

2. The discussion so far might be taken to indicate that there is a basic ambiguity in the term class position, in so far as it is interpreted as economic power in the market (Gerth and Mills 1946: 181–2). It might mean both the use of this power in the sphere of production and in the sphere of consumption. Hence class will mean different things depending on which sphere one studies. The discussion between Goldthorpe/Erikson and Leiulfsrud/Woodward (*Sociology* 22 [4] 1988) might be interpreted in this light (see Leiulfsrud and Woodward 1987; Erikson 1984 and Goldthorpe 1983 and 1984).

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