

## **Unsettled Debates in Development Thinking:**

### **Conceptualizing Households in Rural Africa**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The comparative household survey is a basic tool of development practice but it relies on working with a construct, the universal household, whose existence has been repeatedly challenged, particularly by anthropologists working in rural Africa. The underlying issues were discussed in a *Development and Change* special issue in 1987. The editors of that issue, Jane Guyer and Pauline Peters, did not attempt to resolve the debate, but they laid out three conceptual principles that should guide the way we develop and interpret household survey data in Africa: households are not discrete bounded groups (people draw on networks and structures of extra-domestic kinship for access to resources); households are not homogeneous but rather fractured on lines of gender and generation; households are not fixed forms but constantly evolving processes. This virtual issue contends that these principles remain highly relevant today. It shows this by illustrating them with nine *Development and Change* papers published in that special issue or in subsequent years. This virtual issue similarly does not resolve the household problem, but suggests that it is time for another critical and reflective airing of the debate.

## INTRODUCTION

In contemporary development practice and in development studies, we depend on measures of household well-being to measure the impact of development policies (such as, for example, the MDGs) or to assess changes in patterns of inequality, or to decide who should get what in targeted anti-poverty measures. To assure comparable universes, households surveys work with more or less comparable definitions of what constitutes a household. We accept that these definitions are approximations, or constructs, not reality, but if they deviate too far from the realities they are supposed to record, interviewers become uncertain and our interpretations of results forced and misleading. The question of whether standard household surveys are a particularly inappropriate instrument in rural Africa has a long history in development studies, a point of recurring tension between anthropologists and economists and demographers. The issue surfaces from time to time and is then brushed aside while we get back to the everyday business of exchanging measurement and critique. This virtual issue contends that it is important to once more give the issue a thorough airing. To do so it returns to a classic *Development and Change* special issue — *Conceptualizing the Household: Issues of Theory and Policy in Africa*, edited by Jane Guyer and Pauline Peters and published in 1987.

In their introduction, Guyer and Peters (1987: 197, and this virtual issue) saw, perhaps somewhat optimistically, academic and policy concerns about Africa shifting definitively away from static description and short-term intervention towards a concern with the dynamics of long-term change. They observed that this shift had opened up cross-disciplinary debate on the dynamics of African families, with anthropologists emphasizing the cultural specificity and variability of change in domestic groups while other social scientists tended to work with general household models. They did not expect that their special issue would settle these debates but rather wanted to lay out how the issues were defined and addressed by different disciplines in Africa-based and northern-based work, by practitioners as well as scholars and by both feminist and mainstream theorists. Guyer and Peters sought to achieve no resolution to the debates, but they did establish a number of central methodological arguments on the conceptualization of households in sub-

Saharan Africa. Their special issue represented one of the high points of interchange between academic anthropology and development studies in the journal. As this virtual issue illustrates, each of Guyer and Peters' arguments continues to have great importance for theoretical and practical approaches to the dynamics of domestic groups in rural Africa, and, arguably, far beyond.

## **THE SHIFTING CONTEXT OF THE HOUSEHOLD DEBATE**

The Guyer and Peters' collection appeared at a conjunctural moment in contemporary African history, in the decade of the Berg Report (Berg, 1981) and towards the beginning of the wave of 'structural adjustment' reforms undertaken in its wake. In the following years a series of shifts in development thinking affected the ways the issues raised by the collection were understood. The macro-economic was analytically reduced to fiscal space, economic structure lost its analytical importance, interest in agricultural growth declined and peasants became smallholders, much like owners of any small enterprise. The strategic issue of economic growth was presumed to have been resolved ('getting the prices right') and thus ceded its analytical importance to poverty alleviation and questions of governance. In addressing poverty at a micro-level the relative analytical importance of economic property declined as almost everything anyone possessed, including friends, became a form of capital. Poverty and well-being were seen as multi-dimensional, with economic resources constituting only one part of what people have to build on. The rural household was no longer seen as a farming unit but as a group of people combining various income streams and different kinds of resources in a livelihood strategy.

The focus on well-being at the individual and household level in development thinking on rural Africa had both positive and negative implications. The positive side was recognition that economic growth is not an end in itself. Its importance and justification are grounded in its contribution to improvement in the well-being of people, a process which is neither unidirectional nor inevitable and which is mediated by inequality. The negative side of the changes was, however, that the relation between long-term processes of macro-economic change, the dynamics of

domestic groups and changes in individual well-being have fallen from analytical view. In development practice and rhetoric, rural poverty in Africa became almost a kind of primal state. Africa was increasingly viewed as the continent of disease, conflict, oppression of women, missing markets and bad governance, all rooted somehow in its tenacious and particular traditions. The processes of class formation that sharpen rural–urban difference, limit access to prime commercial land and exacerbate social and communitarian conflicts were largely ignored. Suggested treatments for failures in well-being became remedial — poverty alleviation through targeted safety-nets.

Throughout these changes, the household survey remained a stock tool of the development trade, but there were adjustments of content and method. The focus on targeted anti-poverty interventions demanded capacity to compare households so as to be able to distinguish between them. In some countries, household income and expenditure surveys added new variables intended to measure social capital. Some assets were added to the demographic and health surveys (DHS) and a methodology developed by health economists at the World Bank to measure the relation between health and poverty (Gwatkin, 2001). Targeting also raised new concern with intra-household resource allocation and thus a need for more discrimination of individual information within households, particularly on access to property and consumption shares. Detailed regular surveys of rural household production, like those promoted by FAO in the 1970s and early 1980s, declined, however, as their funding withered along with the capacity in ministries of agriculture to carry them out and the interest from farming systems research in their results.

Papers published in *Development and Change* in the following years both mirrored these shifts in development practice and thinking and reflected critically upon them. In doing so, they often touched upon the conceptual issues around the household that were dealt with in the Guyer and Peters special issue. This virtual issue returns to some of these papers to locate the shifts, to reflect on what is missing or unresolved and to suggest the current relevance of these issues. The papers chosen are only part of the rich corpus of *Development and Change* papers that could be included here. Indeed every one of the papers in the initial special issue dealt in some way with the relation between familial change and well-being in rural Africa.

I have tried to identify papers that touch on important conceptual issues with relevance to ongoing debates. Of course there were also many important contributions to these debates which were not published in *Development and Change*.

### **THREE METHODOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES**

Guyer and Peters' superb introductory essay (1987, and this virtual issue), draws attention to the fact that until the 1960s the concept of the household had little use or legitimacy in social science research on rural Africa.<sup>1</sup> They point out (Guyer and Peters 1987: 200) that the issues around conceptualizing the household in sub-Saharan Africa are rooted in a major post-colonial shift in analytical language: the transformation of rural people from 'tribesmen' to peasants.<sup>2</sup> Applying the concept of the peasant household to rural Africa meant locating it within a global history and particularly within the countries of the Third World. This was true both from a Marxist perspective that emphasized the integration of peasant households in exploitative global relations of class or from a neo-classical perspective that saw peasant households trying to maximize their utility within imperfect markets.

Although the concept of the household was being newly extended to Africa, its usefulness and universality had not gone unquestioned elsewhere. There was already an extensive historical and sociological literature on the limitations of the concept and difficulties in the definition of households (see for example the classic collection edited by Laslett and Wall, 1977). The concept itself, in its English form, connotes both residence (house) and property (hold), but this is not necessarily conveyed in conventional translations of the concept as a descriptive term. In Romance languages, for example, the term familial grouping is used, much closer to the term 'domestic group' and clearly connoting relations of kinship. Even in the European contexts out of which it arose, the concept of households is thus 'fuzzy', labelling units formed through control of resources, co-residence, kinship and

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<sup>1</sup> See also Guyer's earlier (1981) essay on this point.

<sup>2</sup> Anthropologists of my age will remember reading Fallers (1961) article: 'Are African Cultivators to be Called "Peasants"?'.

marriage in different ways. Historical research in Europe had also put paid to the idea that there is an inevitable trajectory of movement from ‘traditional’ extended family households to ‘modern’ nuclear family households in industrializing societies.

Are there, however, particular problems in using the household concept in rural Africa? Can universalist approaches to the household, fuzzy or not, do justice analytically to the specificities of African experience, particularly in rural areas? Guyer and Peters argued that there were three respects in which household models were analytically inadequate in Africa: first, households are not discrete bounded groups — people draw on networks and structures of extra-domestic kinship for access to resources; second, households are not homogeneous but rather fractured on lines of gender and generation; and third, households are not fixed forms but constantly evolving processes.

### **External and Inter-household Relations Shape Household Form and Dynamics**

Standard household models assume that households are discrete bounded units. People know which unit they belong to and they know what property it owns. Guyer and Peters (1987: 200) found that the dynamics of rural households in Africa are not well captured by unitary households models based on normative versions of rural Europe:

largely because people do still draw on the structures and networks of extra-domestic kinship for resource access and do still organize intrahousehold relations according to culturally specific rubrics.

Notwithstanding the often massive reorganization of political and economic structures in the colonial and post-colonial periods, the social relations of production and consumption have still to be understood through the practices and ideologies of descent and inheritance, marriage and bridewealth, residence and seniority.

Universalist perspectives have responded in sharply different ways to the argument from ethnographic complexity. Neoclassical and institutionalist approaches

appropriated the language of social capital and simply redefined the resources that households control to include such extra-household relations. This has not proven very easy to do while maintaining the criterion of measurability that econometric modelling demands. More importantly for those not wedded to econometric method, very different questions are reduced to a single analytical category, and things that are not equivalent are made to appear as if they are.

Marxist approaches experimented briefly with recognizing the historical specificity of Africa by conceptualizing pre-capitalist 'African modes of production', articulated with capitalism yet dominated and ultimately undermined by it. This approach worked best in capturing the dynamics of labour reserve areas, both in southern Africa (Wolpe, 1972) and the Sahel (Rey, 1976), but it could also be mechanistic and ahistorical, reducing all of pre-colonial Africa to some kind of classless and unchanging traditional order.

More successful has been Marxist-influenced research that historicizes capitalism, insisting that the sway of capital is contested both from within and at its boundaries. This work also emphasizes that where capital dominates politically it deploys power in its pursuit of profit without necessarily working through the niceties of liberal political institutions and free markets. One of the best examples of research that synthesized anthropological research and political economy in approaches to the household in rural Africa is Murray's reconsideration of the usefulness of Fortes' (1958) concept of the developmental cycle of domestic groups in southern Africa (Murray, 1981, 1987 and this virtual issue).

Fortes' concept is a good example of a conceptual approach to households that begins with processes rather than fixed definitional or compositional forms. He pointed out that a domestic group could shift in form over the life course of its members. A group that at one point appeared to be poor, headed by a woman with small children, could become in time a domestic group headed by a man, include various adults of productive age and appear very prosperous. Still later it could be composed of an ageing widow with many young dependants. Yet all these forms were implicit in a single structural process.

Though he did not speak of peasants, Fortes' approach is reminiscent of Chayanov's (1966) analysis of the Russian peasantry in the post-land reform period when one could speak of an open land frontier.

Murray showed how important such a process was for understanding the dynamics of migrant labour recruitment in South Africa linked to Bantustans and labour reserves in neighbouring countries. But Murray also showed how historically changing contradictions of class and gender destabilized the migrant labour system, from within and without, in ways that profoundly shifted the dynamics of households. The polarization implicit in the emergence of a relative elite of professional mine labour migrants and a generation of young and middle-aged men engulfed by structural unemployment disrupted the flow of labour back and forth from the reserves. The rapidly expanding number of women-headed households in both rural and urban areas was not, however, simply an epiphenomenal result of the disruption of return migration. It also represented new opportunities for women in their struggles against the customary definition of marriage and conjugal responsibility within households. Murray thus carefully crafts an analysis that deploys all three of Guyer and Peters' methodological points in an essay that continues to provide insight into the political and economic dilemmas of rural southern Africa today.

Guyer and Peters' insistence on the blurred boundaries of the household and the ways its forms and activities are shaped and construed by cross cutting practices and ideologies anticipated current anthropological approaches to rural property. Contemporary anthropological research emphasizes that property rights are rarely in practice defined in the sharp exclusive ways that formal legal systems demand (Verdery and Humphrey, 2004). Rather they are politically and culturally constructed through social processes that also make them contingent and fuzzy. Particularly in rural Africa and in relation to land, both ownership and access are negotiable and contested (cf. Berry, 1984, 2009; Lund, 2009; Sikor and Lund, 2009). Even where legal systems sharply define rights of property, claims based on them depend on the practice of legal authority.



Research documenting the flexibility and negotiability of rural property in Africa was particularly important in shaping policy discourse on land rights in the wake of structural adjustment. This work directly challenged the assumption that it was necessary to stabilize land markets through individual titling to improve agricultural productivity in Africa. Various studies showed both that individual titling schemes, as in Kenya, had not improved rural incomes and that existing flexible tenure regimes were associated with investment in agricultural production. Moreover, existing forms of tenure, loosely grouped under the rubric of customary land rights, assured stability of access and control to those who invested in them. Such research was influential even within the World Bank (cf. Bruce, 1993; Bruce and Migot-Adholla, 1993).

Illustrative of this research is de Zeeuw's study of access to land in Burkina Faso (1997 and this virtual issue), an example of the ways in which case studies can engage with policy debates in powerful ways. He showed that land borrowing within existing forms of loosely defined patrilineage-based tenure allowed for efficient use of fallow land and enough security to foster investment and intensification. He argued that formalizing contracts could actually hinder innovation by making owners less likely to lend. As pressure on land grew, short-term borrowing had increased relative to long-term borrowing.

De Zeeuw showed that lineage groups continued to structure patterns of borrowing. Most borrowers were men, but women also borrowed from their in-laws particularly for horticultural production. As money was being made available for fencing and wells through development projects, groups of women were borrowing land from important men in the community to establish collective gardens. These women were not depending on ties mediated through their husbands or their husbands' patrilineages to borrow land. Their security of tenure depended on the way they engaged with local politics, more specifically the support they gave to land-lenders in local disputes. As the politics of production shifted, the activities of domestic

groups, both households and lineages, were thus also shifting. De Zeeuw's paper is an insightful illustration of Guyer and Peters' first point — that household dynamics are not bounded by household groups. It also illustrates their second point, that households in rural Africa are not homogeneous units. It is that point and its consequences to which we turn next.

### **Households are Fractured on Lines of Gender and Generation**

Guyer and Peters' essay is well anchored in feminist work of the 1970s and 1980s that challenged the assumption of household homogeneity. Although research initially focused on households in industrialized market-dominated societies, by 1987 there was a wide literature showing how the assumption that benefits and responsibilities were equally shared within households undermined the objectives of many development interventions across the world. Many argued that in rural Africa the great productive importance of women in agriculture particularly undermined the usefulness of unitary household models. A series of studies showed that Boserup (1970) had not quite got the issue right when she argued that development of cash-crop production controlled by men had relegated women to the subsistence sphere. The problem was that women were still being asked to do a very large proportion of the labour without reaping income from their work. When they did not do so, they not surprisingly reduced their participation in cash-crop production (Carney, 1988; Dey, 1981; Mackintosh, 1989; Whitehead, 1991).

Reviewing the available literature in 1987, Guyer and Peters found that:

the solidary household assumed for European, Middle Eastern, Asian, Latin American and North American farmers and peasants is inapplicable to Africa, where there are social units centring on an adult male with authority over land and over his wife/wives and children who often have their own separable stocks of property and authority. (Guyer and Peters, 1987: 207)

Note that Guyer and Peters here draw attention to the fact that children as well as wives have areas of autonomy within the household. They also conclude

that there is no single better model that would hold for all of Africa, given the diversity of the ways in which conjugal ties, raising children, intergenerational responsibilities, production, consumption, investment and distribution are organized (ibid.). Their conclusion in 1987 was that bargaining models were a better approximation.

Fapohunda's paper (1987 and this virtual issue) focuses on the implications of the relative autonomy of women within west African households for the design of development interventions. Her paper is of particular interest because unlike the editors, and many of the other contributors to the special issue, she is an economist. Her paper thus foreshadowed an enormous body of work done by micro-economists to suspend the assumption of a unitary household and develop models of intra-household resource allocation (see particularly the collection edited by Haddad et al., 1997).

Fapohunda saw the normative model of a monogamous nuclear family household as a colonial imposition that was carried over to post-independence governance in Nigeria. She found that it diverged from the realities of household organization in southern Nigeria in various respects (Fapohunda, 1987: 283–4). First, many women were not economically dependent on their husbands. Those living with their husbands could better be seen as workers with family responsibilities and many others were either *de facto* or *de jure* household heads. Second, income was not really pooled within households. Spouses did not hold joint bank accounts and rarely held joint assets. Correspondingly, they also had no common budget; each one had separate allocative priorities. Third, each of the spouses had financial commitments that extended to their wider and different families of origin.

Fapohunda argued that there was a disjuncture between the normative model, in which the man was either the bread-winner or patriarchal coordinator of common interests, and the realities of rural life. This disjuncture or misreading had led to inappropriate government policies that excited the ire of women: applying land ownership limitations to households rather than to individuals, favouring men in conditions of employment, and channelling earnings in

development projects towards men. Fapohunda thus concluded, with many other feminist economists, that Becker's New Household Economics was based on false premises and should be replaced by theoretical models that posited 'spouses to be individuals entering into family transactions in a world of risk and uncertainty to procure benefits unavailable or at a higher cost elsewhere'. She endorsed the applicability of game theory models for understanding the dynamics of households in the Nigerian context. Note therefore that Fapohunda is not arguing against universalist models of households; rather she is suggesting that models based on individual rather than household maximization would yield better analytical results.

Attention to gender differences within households and to the ways in which women exercised individual and collective agency in defying men's privilege, opened other forms of intra-household differentiation to analytical view. The significance of different generational positions had already been emphasized in the Marxist literature on a 'lineage mode of production' in the 1970s and earlier anthropological accounts had also recognized relations of seniority within sets of brothers or cousins. Neither of these approaches problematized, however, the relation between gender and generation. Feminist work questioned whether women functioned passively in bridewealth systems as the object of transactions between men of different descent groups and different generations.

Moreover, in earlier anthropological work in Africa the important generational differences recognized analytically were those between different age-groups of adult men. More recent work on generation and life-course takes children to be autonomous actors whose interests may neither be the same nor be protected by the adults to whom they are social linked. Adults may count on the work of children in their care, but that need not necessarily mean that children do what they are asked to do, or that they hand over to their parents the income they get from work.

Generational tensions cut across the broader open social groups within which households are embedded, and it may be adults as well as children who do not

do what they are normatively supposed to do. Children may have rights to property, for example, that are contested by adults charged with their care. This is what Rose documented in her paper on the tension between orphans and their guardians over land in Rwanda (2005 and this virtual issue). Rose noted that much of the literature on land-grabbing in Africa focuses on the need to protect the land rights of women, particularly widows. Children's land rights are not addressed independently and are often compromised or negotiated away despite the increasing number of orphans — the result of AIDS mortality as well as violent conflicts. Orphans are viewed 'as a non-category of land claimant; their land rights are perceived as deferred and potential — to be realized when the orphans reach maturity — rather than as current and actual (Rose, 2005: 914). This view is based on the idea that the rights of orphans will be protected by guardians, kin who assume responsibility for the well-being of an orphaned child.

Based on research in Rwanda, Rose argues that customary and national laws, policies and legal processes assume the benevolent functioning of guardianship, whereas both ideas and practices of guardianship are changing in ways that do not assure protection of orphans' land rights. There is now much written about the strain on networks of social support with the increased number of orphans after the Rwandan massacres and with the onset of AIDS. Rose observes, however, that guardianship practices actually began to change before the war. As land became scarcer, family members competed with each other for available land and orphans' guardians, the people who were supposed to represent their claims in courts and before local authorities, confronted a conflict of interest (ibid.: 915). Rose looked at a series of 100 cases of land disputes involving orphaned boys and girls. Not surprisingly she found that older children succeeded better than younger claimants and that those with an advocate fared better than those without. But the initiative and endurance evidenced by the children in the legal process convinced her that there were strong argument for recognizing orphans' active legal capacity.

Analytical attention to gender and generation has also led to consideration of tensions and differences rooted in different positions within a life course. Like

Rose, Warner et al. (1997 and this virtual issue) did not question the importance of understanding different gender roles in designing development interventions in rural Africa, but argued that marital status and seniority might be just as important as gender. Warner et al. were particularly concerned with the design of well-targeted interventions; here it is important that not all women are the same. Drawing on research from the rural Dagomba area of Ghana, they argued that there were a series of steps that allowed one to pass out of the category of 'junior woman', beginning with marriage, then becoming pregnant and successfully bearing children, then being recognized as a full 'cooking wife'. Cooking wives were allowed to take some days off from cooking, were more likely than junior women to have off-farm sources of revenue, to amass livestock, to control separate food stocks, to own their own furniture, to contribute food within the household,<sup>3</sup> to be involved in extra-compound transfers and to receive assistance (cash, kind and labour) from the compound head and other members of the compound.

Warner et al. observe that conceptual distinctions have methodological consequences. They do not advocate a total scrapping of the household survey, but argue that the ways in which various approaches are combined in a research strategy should 'solicit as much information as possible relating to individual members of rural societies, rather than basing them on preconceptions relating to the presumed significance of any one social construct' (Warner et al., 1997: 161). In general, household surveys should avoid assuming common goals for all living within a household and enumerators should try if possible to get information about a person from that person rather than from the household head.

Here Warner et al., in their cautious ambivalence, reflect a general quandary among many researchers who have abandoned the assumption of a homogeneous household: many endorse a turn towards greater methodological

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<sup>3</sup> In line with literature on the West African savanna, Warner et al. use the term compound, rather than household, to denote a co-resident farming group, which may be composed of various households that are defined by relations of conjugality and parenthood. Elsewhere compounds are referred to as households and I have followed that usage here.

individualism in the collection and interpretation of survey data, but in practice the key survey instruments in rural Africa, the LSMS (the Living Standards Measurement Survey), the national census and the DHS are household based. This brings us to the central methodological question involved in understanding the relation between the dynamics of households and the dynamics of well-being: how do we define households so that we can compare them across time and space without distorting our understanding of the processes that make and place them?

### **Understanding the Dynamics of Households Requires Making Both Units and Processes Subjects of Analysis**

It is now widely accepted in the pages of journals of development studies (including *Development and Change*) and in development agencies that it is inappropriate to assume that the household is a unit that maximizes well-being for all its members. Yet in practice the household survey remains the major source of comparative evidence on well-being. The gender critique is often reduced to distinguishing between households headed by women and those headed by men, putting aside the more fundamental concern with gender disparities within households raised by the feminist critique. Why this disjuncture?

There are a series of methodological difficulties, both in research and in the design of policy, in abandoning the assumption that the household is unitary and homogeneous. If we are particularly concerned with issues of well-being, everyday relations of cooperation and sharing, as well as conflict, affect what happens to individuals. Often these cluster in groups with shared life histories reflected in kinship or co-residence. How do we take account in research and policy design of the fact that individuals are not islands? Policies work with classification and comparison, across space and time. What is our unit of comparison? Do we simply compare the situation of groups of individuals within communities or between communities and countries as they change over time? Does our definition of such groups depend on the particular

questions we are asking in our study, making it difficult to apply our results in other studies? What makes such groups comparable across different contexts? It is easier to abandon universal definitions if one is an ethnographer than it is for an economist, demographer or policy maker.

Guyer and Peters are aware of these methodological conundrums:

On the one hand, concentration on establishing correct types can result in misconstrual of the dynamics which generate them. On the other, for the purpose of addressing specific issues in specific contexts, there is a valid need to define which are the *key* social units in a particular system, how they are constituted, their composition, locus/loci of authority, problems of allocation and so on, in relation to other units. (Guyer and Peters, 1987: 204–5)

Their answer is that both units and processes must be the subject of analysis. Similarly in policy frameworks ‘determination of what is “appropriate” or not depends on an adequate comprehension of the social processes of which social units are part’ (ibid.: 205).

Not everyone is content with this slightly ambiguous answer. In a testy introduction to an edited collection on African households, Van de Walle (2006: xxi-xxii) criticizes anthropologists, and Guyer and Peters in particular, for constructing a whipping post, a generic household model that simply does not exist. Each discipline defines households in its own way. For Van de Walle as a demographer the household is just a unit of enumeration, the most practical system for organizing the pattern of residence of a population accessible to interviewers who must do a complete and non-redundant count of a population for a census, or for sampling in a way that is representative of women of child-bearing age (ibid.: xxi). Van de Walle is being somewhat ingenuous here since censuses contain vast numbers of questions that have nothing to do with people as abstract objects of a count and we use the data they provide to ask a range of questions that do not have to do just with demographic variables. The more fundamental question is whether the quest of the enumerators to define a household and the people in it leads to a sufficiently good approximation to provide information on the people and



processes we are studying.

Current debates in South Africa on the impact of government policies on inequality illustrate the dilemma. The household debate is a politically sensitive issue in post-Apartheid South Africa. The ANC government has been criticized for the hesitancy of its redistributive measures, particularly land reform, and its fiscal conservatism, but it points to the expanded coverage of pensions and child benefits in rural areas and to the priority it gives to job creation. Assessing these counter-claims means having some way to look comparatively at changes in well-being, particularly in rural areas. Household surveys have been the standard instrument for doing so, yet there is no accord on what they show. The central issues are conceptual, not the absence of data.

Take Agincourt, a rural sub-district in Mpumalanga, with possibly the most intensively statistically observed population in sub-Saharan Africa. The School of Public Health of Witwatersrand University, the Medical Research Council and the local health service set up a project there in 1992, in the period of transition from Apartheid, to provide information for health planning. It includes a health and demographic surveillance system that, after a baseline census in 1992, has annually recorded vital events and established population profiles. The project has been the site of a wide range of research, ranging from the biomedical to the ethnographic, on rural health issues. It has had substantial funding from large international foundations such as the Wellcome Trust. Yet despite nearly twenty years of longitudinal data and reflective scholarly publication, there is still no certainty among scholars over one basic rural population question to which the Agincourt study was expected to respond: what is happening to the organization of rural households in South Africa?

The national data appear to show an increase in the number of single person households in rural areas, perhaps indicative of eroding social ties. But for some researchers the Agincourt data show that household composition is fluid and projections indicate that there is a tendency towards complex household forms (Wittenberg and Collinson, 2007: 136). Accordingly, Wittenberg and Collinson line up with Russell (2003) who sees rural South Africans as returning to extended

family households, in a distinctly African pattern, a long-term trajectory quite different to that of the normative nuclear families of Europe. They do not therefore see any tendency towards social isolation.

In fact, Russell's position reflects earlier research that she did in Swaziland, where she made the case for a radical dismissal of universal household models, including just for enumeration purposes, presumably implying a methodological critique of the whole Agincourt study (Russell, 1993 and this virtual issue):

the time has come to abandon the assumption, for too long unquestioned, that all populations are necessarily composed of households of some sort or another. This assumption has simplified the task of collecting census and survey data but at the cost of blunting our awareness both of the diversity and complexity of domestic arrangements in many places, and of the ephemerality and transience of many social arrangements for the sharing of roofs, space and meals. (Russell, 1993: 756)

Russell argues that the assumption of a discrete unitary household is particularly inappropriate in African societies where there is a very broad range of alternative and overlapping domestic groups (Guyer and Peters' first point), and particularly in southern Africa where migrant workers live apart from significant kin but contribute importantly to their support (Russell, 1993: 760). In such a context comparison of households as discrete groups leads to incorrect assessments of poverty and well-being.

Russell takes as an example the Swaziland National Income and Expenditure Survey of 1985, which excluded household members if they lived away most of the time, even if they returned for weekends at the end of the month. Had migrant workers been classed as members of their rural households, she claims, all of their earned wage income would have been counted as rural household income, providing a very different profile of national income distribution. Instead the report focused on the stock figure of the poor woman-headed rural household (*ibid.*: 777–78).

Russell is right about the difficulties that migrant labour systems pose for census methodologies and the misleading assumptions behind some of the feminization of poverty literature, but she is also being rather ingenuous for polemical effect. A household survey methodology does not require that all of migrant workers' income be assigned either to their rural or to their urban households. Emphasis is given to expenditure precisely to try to work out where wealth is consumed and invested.

More fundamentally, historical and ethnographic particularism can also stand in the way of recognizing structural processes of change. In her more recent work on contemporary South Africa, for example, Russell argues that classifying households in terms of their composition at any one point in time is inherently flawed (Russell, 2003: 22) and unnecessary when you can ask people about what they are doing and why. On the basis of her interviews, she sees a nuclear family model to be appropriate for white and Indian families in South Africa but not for African families with flexible patterns of residence and with histories of absenteeism. Absenteeism is a product both of histories of migrant labour and of the African system of kinship which 'itself allows, even encourages absenteeism' (ibid.: 38). In the event she does see a common transition taking place among all racial groups: the entrepreneurial culture of the urban environment is making everyone more self-centred (ibid.)

Here we see the risks in relying on ethnographic insight, making conclusions about processes from our interpretations of conversations with people about their lives. Though she makes important methodological points about the limitations of household surveys, Russell's emphasis on an Africa penchant for absenteeism relativizes the changes in forms and terms of separation between conjugal partners and between parents and children in rural southern Africa. Household surveys that attempt to register changes in composition over time provide only an approximation, but that approximation arguably could tell us more about processes of change than does Russell's theory of converging individualism. Murray's paper (1987 and this virtual issue) provides an alternative way of understanding processes of contemporary household change,

one that, like Russell takes account of the specific histories of rural people in southern Africa but, unlike Russell, looks at capitalist development as a gendered class process rather than as unfolding cultural individualism.

Whether one employs the universal categories of the typical demographic and health survey or the flexible culturally specific approach to domestic groups suggested by Russell, or Murray's complex class analysis, questions and interpretations are shaped by the theoretical premises that guide the research. Each is a construction in theory, an approximation of reality, but some are better approximations than others, and these differences matter.

This is the point that I wanted to make in a review of two rural household studies often cited to show that agricultural productivity and thus poverty could be substantially reduced in Africa if some of the resources currently allocated to men were assigned to women (O'Laughlin, 2007 and this virtual issue). In the first of these studies, Udry (1996) used on an existing data set from Burkina Faso, based on a standard ICRISAT approach to small-scale household-based agricultural production in Africa. Udry was thus limited by the assumptions made in the original data set. These included exclusion of income from off-farm labour and the classification of collective fields as men's fields, making it impossible to provide any definitive interpretation of the impact of assigning a greater share of labour and inputs to women's fields.

In the second study reviewed, Jones (1983, 1986) designed a small-scale rapid survey focused on women household producers as part of an inquiry into the reasons for the failure of an irrigation scheme (SEMRY) in northern Cameroon. She found that productivity in the scheme was compromised by the withdrawal of women's labour and argued that they would put more work into rice if they received a greater share of the revenue from men's fields. Her evidence for this was that women living on their own (widows, divorcees) and senior wives within polygynous households put more work into their own irrigated rice fields than did other married women. But the design of her survey did not include men's work, either agricultural or off-farm. Further, as in the ICRISAT survey, collective sorghum fields were understood to be men's property. Jones thus

precluded the possibility that there was any division of labour or pooling that made it sensible for married women to work in collective food production, particularly if they did not have the special labour privileges of a senior wife.

In any research we ask certain questions and not others and the same data can often be interpreted in different ways. In both these cases, the authors wrote with a conception of gender that emphasized the inefficiency rather than instability of gender hierarchies. Their work was also grounded within a micro-economic approach that made it difficult to bring cross-cutting processes of longer duration and greater scale into their analysis. I found it more likely, for example, that the stagnation of agricultural productivity in Burkina Faso in the 1980s had to do with its constitution as a labour reserve than with traditional patterns of intra-household resource allocation. In Jones's case, her study took place at a time that would be seen from another theoretical perspective as a period of intense class conflict: 'Struggles between husbands and wives over work and compensation were embedded in conflicts between SEMRY management and the occupants of the scheme over prices paid for rice, input charges, control of the crop, conditions of work and use of land' (O'Laughlin, 2007: 33). Whether we focus on households as units or as processes, we depend on theory to do so, but different explanations have different political consequences. For Jones (and SEMRY project management) the core political issue lay within the household, the allocation of income between men and women. From a perspective that focuses on the relation between class and gender, there are two core issues, neither confined to the boundaries of the household: the core political issue would be the terms of the contract between SEMRY and growers, both men and women; and the jural equality of women and men.

### **THE SPECIFICITY OF AFRICAN HOUSEHOLDS?**

Returning to Guyer and Peters' three conceptual points, it is clear that households are often not discrete entities, nor homogeneous, nor relatively stable units. Depending on the questions with which we are concerned, it may

make little analytical sense to maintain the assumption that they are so. But these are such general methodological points that they seem likely to inform analysis of households in other contexts than just rural sub-Saharan African. Indeed, in another classic *Development and Change* article, Wolf (1990 and this virtual issue) made similar points in her critique of the concept of ‘household strategy’. Wolf described the quite different behaviour towards their families of origin of young women migrant factory workers in Java and Taiwan. Though Taiwanese parents could and did ask their daughters to postpone marriage and remit most of what they earned to their rural families, in Java neither parents nor their migrant daughters necessarily repressed their own desires and needs for some sort of collective good. The young factory women with whom Wolf spoke worked to fulfill their own objectives, which could include helping their families as well as buying consumer goods for themselves. She concluded that it is important not to assume unitary households with clear collective strategies but to ‘better understand the social mechanisms, the struggles and the processes within households which perpetuate domination or engender resistance’ (Wolf, 1990: 67).

Still, the fact that Guyer and Peters’ three conceptual points do not apply only to rural Africa does not preclude the possibility that there are particular African historical experiences that have generated specific forms and processes of formation of domestic groups. There are various possibilities here in the literature on rural Africa. One, reflected in this virtual issue in Fapohunda’s paper, is the relative importance and autonomy of the mother/child unit (hearthhold), reflecting perhaps women’s important role in food production. Another, often identified with Sara Berry (2002) but also implicit in the Marxist lineage mode of production approach (cf. Terray 1972), is that accumulation of wealth in people has been more important in rural Africa than the accumulation of property, landed property in particular. A related proposition is the notion that in rural Africa land claims are fundamentally dependent on political processes and thus inherently fuzzy and negotiable (Lund, 2009). One of the editors of the original special issue, Pauline Peters, has observed that the appropriation of commercial land in parts of Africa is not all that fuzzy and has structural long-term implications much like those elsewhere (Peters, 2002). There are limits to

negotiability. So the debate on the dynamics of the household takes us rapidly into other areas of unsettled debate in development studies.

### **Contemporary Cross-Disciplinary Dialogue on the Household**

There is today little discussion of the household problem in the development literature on rural Africa. I would like to say that this is because the three principles identified by Guyer and Peters have become conventional wisdom, but that is not the case. There is recurring interest, particularly among feminist economists, in developing bargaining models that can account for variation in intra-household resource allocation, but in practice the methodological issues remain daunting. If we look at the poverty assessments produced as part of the IMF/World Bank initiated PRSP process in most African countries, intra-household inequality is often mentioned, but the arguably more important issue of the determinants of variation is seldom analysed. Even less do we see poverty assessments grappling with the non-discrete embeddedness of households and their processual character. There is usually some reference to qualitative and participatory methods, but most often in ways that make anthropologists and historians shudder at their lack of rigour and superficiality.

Guyer and Peters, each in her own distinctive way, continue to move with ease and care between the worlds of African history, anthropological theory and practical development issues. Guyer, for example devoted one chapter of her exceedingly erudite book *Marginal Gains* (Guyer, 2004) to a discussion of household budgets in Ghana. She arrived at the conclusion that there were differences in expenditure by different social categories within households that were invisible in a *per capita* averaging (ibid.: 180). This point was confirmed in a restudy by Udry and Woo (2007), who drew from their study the methodologically troubling conclusion that respondents' estimates of expenditure probably include what they think they should have spent as well as what they do spend. Peters relates questions of household dynamics to class processes, particularly in relation to issues of land. She recently pointed out, for example, that new Malawi Land Law, which in its recognition of matrilineal

rights to land might appear to be safeguarding women's rights to land, in practice would reconfigure current use rights in ways that could dispossess significant numbers of rural households from access to land (Peters, 2010).

Guyer and Peters are, however, exceptional in their capacity to address cross-disciplinary readerships in development studies. The kind of special issue they put together in 1987 for *Development and Change* would be difficult to organize today. Anthropological theory does engage extensively with development rhetoric, but from a Foucauldian distance that treats it as an object of critical study, disputing its tendency to generalize and emphasizing contextual particularity and diversity. The post-colonial emancipatory and anti-capitalist projects that arose in various African countries in the thirty years between 1960 and 1990 made it seem possible to work within the instability of state practice and discourse — efforts now seen by many anthropologists as modernist dabbling in social engineering. Why would one need to agree on conceptualizing the household, except within a project of governance?

## CONCLUSION

In a Foucauldian vision, one could see the household census as a typical observational instrument of the modern liberal state, grounded in utilitarian concern with the state of collective health and backed by the development of modern statistics (cf. Foucault, 2000). It is a technique of governance that both represents reality and makes it; recognition of households also gives them bureaucratic identity. The concern of development institutions with the construction of indicators of well-being such as the Human Development Index, based on internationally comparable household surveys and used to signal development successes and failures, certainly suggests a project of international liberal governance. Nor is the household census a technique of governance only in the liberal tradition. After all, the child of Joseph and Mary was born when they were returning to *his* natal village to be counted. And this is not unlike the former *hukou* Chinese household registration system that gave unskilled urban migrants official



presence only in the rural villages from which they came.

To say that the standardized household survey is a technique of governance does not mean that it is simply an ideological fabrication. It is a construct that refers to something important — how institutions recognize the ways in which people organize relatively permanent forms of social cooperation in everyday life. Thus the question of how the household is understood has real practical implications. Guyer and Peters, and various contributors to this virtual issue, have argued that as far as understanding collective well-being in rural Africa is concerned, it may be more enlightening to suspend the standardizing assumptions of general household surveys to probe the shifting boundaries, composition and internal dynamics of particular sets of households. This is an argument that really applies everywhere.

This virtual issue will not have settled the debates around the conceptualization of the household, any more than the original Guyer and Peters special issue did. But hopefully it has made clear that the conceptual issues they raised still apply to the ways we now measure, compare and, most importantly, understand, poverty and well-being. Unsettled debates can be unsettling and should be.

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