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Comments

Household Studies: Why?, What? and How?

Some Preliminary Notes

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1. Many of our colleagues will no doubt be surprised to discover that a number of social scientists are currently enthusiastically advocating research on household structure and function in developing countries. Are economists, demographers and sociologists beginning to take seriously what anthropologists have been studying for years? One might ask, what's all the fuss about?

2. The issue, of course, is whether or not there is anything new to say. Those social scientists currently riding the wave of interest in household studies believe that new concepts and perspectives will help us better understand several features of development. But precisely what they have in mind is sometimes obscured by disciplinary jargon and perspectives which take a narrow view of issues, hence we badly need a broad general review of the issues and the research prospects in this area.

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While a number of people have expressed interest in "new" household studies from a variety of perspectives -- economics, sociology, demography and anthropology -- in fact, very few studies utilizing the new perspectives and concepts have actually been carried out in developing countries.

3. The following notes are intended as preliminary to developing a broad framework outlining the basic assumptions and research problems one finds in the new household studies area. The notes fall under three broad questions: Why should household structures be studied at all? What aspects of household structure should we study and in relation to what causes and consequences should we study them? And, how should we carry out this research?

#### Why Study Household Structure?

4. The "why" question cannot be divorced from a basic definitional problem. What is a household?

- no single definition will do; precise definitions will not stand up in comparative studies due to the fact that households take many forms. Thus, we are stuck with the necessity of using intelligently a broad, flexible definition.
- for purposes of this discussion, households may be defined as a basic social unit within which large or significant proportions of all production, exchange and consumption of valued goods and services takes place.
- a household is not necessarily a co-habiting unit, since in some societies households contain more individuals than can be conveniently housed under a single roof, given local building materials and techniques.
- a slippery feature of the household concept is that, as development takes place, production tends to increasingly occur in non-household institutions. Fortunately, certain key aspects of production and consumption, such as food preparation, personal care, child-rearing, etc., still tend to remain within an identifiable household unit.

- the goods and services produced, consumed and exchanged within the household are of a diverse nature and include direct emotional gratifications as well as "marketable" items.
- it is often difficult to distinguish production from consumption in the activities of a given household member. This is particularly true, for example, in child-rearing, food preparation, and so on. Production and consumption take place simultaneously.

5. The reasons for studying households are extremely diverse, and depend in good part on the conceptual orientation of the investigator. In the following points, we list some of the reasons which seem evident, either implicitly or explicitly, in the writings on this topic.

- studying household structure should provide insight into the total package of goods and services produced, exchanged and consumed under different social and economic conditions. Research on households should contribute to a broader understanding of what development is and what factors influence it.
- similar to the above, is the objective of studying the "impact" of social and economic programs on development, as seen from the household perspective; Thus, instead of just looking at the impact of a program on marketable surpluses and cash incomes, one would take a broader view and look at food intake, leisure, quality of child care, nutrition and other variables which, while difficult to measure, presumably are closely related to household production patterns. What looks like development from one criteria (e.g., cash income) may appear in a different light when some of these other criteria are assessed.
- there is also the hope that studying household production exchange and consumption will tell us about the causal interdependence between variables in the development process. Some illustrations:
  - when children are firmly integrated into household production, how does this influence their school attendance and achievement?
  - how does the magnitude and the direction of the net flow of resources between children and their parents over the life-span of the parents affect childbearing motivation? What technological and social change factors determine the magnitude and direction of these flows?
  - how do shifts in productive organization and technique influence the work load of family members differentially?

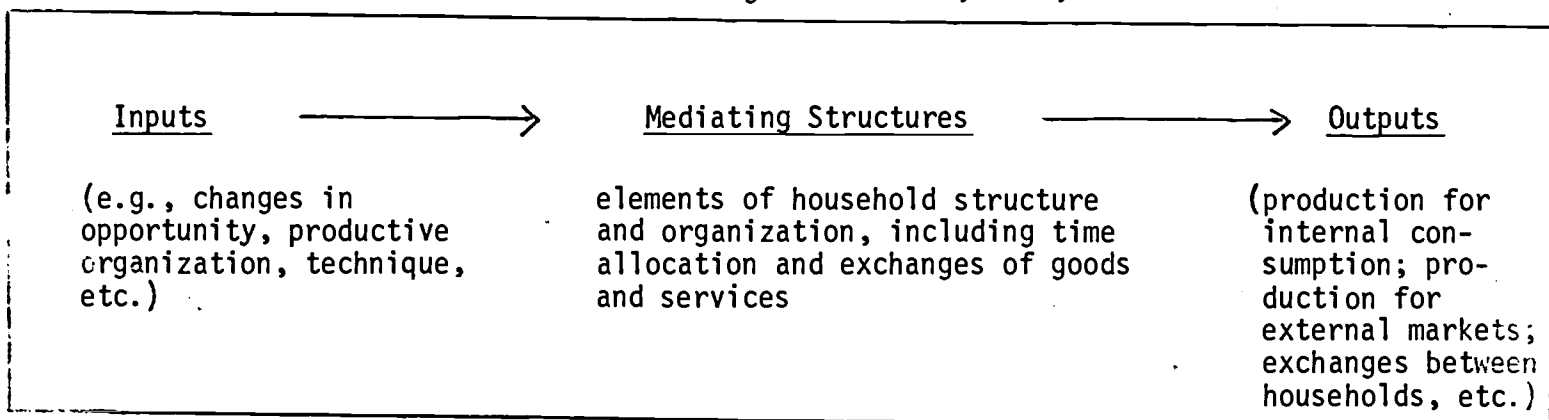
- what are the consequences for family wellbeing of introducing productive techniques which increase the productivity of women as well as the productivity of men?
- do changes in productive technique and income always lead to increases in household consumption patterns?

What Should We Study?

6. Simply to say that we want to study household structure is hardly enough.

The new interest in household studies has revealed a number of departures from previous research on this topic. These include:

- a focus on the causes and consequences of household structure. This interest is in contrast to the more descriptive focus of earlier studies. The generic model, then, is as follows:



Of course, the outputs in this model feedback into the inputs and mediating structures.

- a greater concern with quantitative (rather than qualitative) measurement of the household variables. This is particularly true for anthropologists, sociologists, and demographers currently working in the area. It is less true of the economists as a whole, perhaps due to their tendency to rely upon existing data sets and to extract from them rough proxy measures bearing on the "income" and "time" constraints which face household members as they allocate resources at their disposal. It remains to be seen whether the economist will begin to demand specific detailed data as they increasingly face the limitations of surrogate measures in settings where informal exchanges of goods and services within and between households make inappropriate definitions and variables available in existing data sets.

7. What are the relevant input variables? So many variables presumably influence the ways in which households organize themselves that one hardly knows where to begin. These variables include such things as availability of land resources, population density, non-familial employment (and migration) opportunities, access to markets, several features of productive organization and technique which influence the demand for labor and the skill levels at which demand is greatest, and levels of productivity, leisure, and social security.

8. Obviously, there are advantages to be gained by a particular focus within this broad range of input variables. But what one focuses on in research will depend heavily on the element of household structure and output which interests the investigator. For example:

- if the production (and consumption, in terms of the emotional gratification they provide) of children is a major concern, then one might wish to focus on household variables such as the magnitude and direction of intergenerational transfers of wealth, the extent to which children leave the household unit when they grow up, and so on. These elements of household structure in turn would seem to be logically related to some particular input variables more than others (e.g., children leave the household structure when migration and employment opportunities favor their departure).
- in contrast, if the major interest is in the "quality of child care" a major household variable may be the time which the mother (and/or other responsible adults) allocates to different tasks. A recent UNICEF NEWS states: "Perhaps the most important of all is the lightening of the daily burdens of mothers thereby enabling them to devote more time to their children's well-being."
- if the focus is on the marketable surplus which households contribute to the broader market, then the input variables might well concern productive technique and social organization within and between households.

9. What are the household variables? Quantifying household structure has proved to be an exceedingly difficult task: What dimensions should be quantified? With what methodological techniques?

10. Time-budget approaches developed elsewhere often for rather different purposes have proved to be particularly interesting to several investigators. Categorizing time into various productive (and consumption) components has proved to be a difficult but not impossible task in preliminary comparative studies. More systematic work will be required to refine our approaches in this area.

11. One problem with time-budget approaches is that in themselves they do not deal with productivity. A child may contribute a great deal of time to certain tasks that an adult could do much more quickly, or to a task of marginal importance. Is he or she required to do this as part of socialization into adult productive roles or because the work is really necessary? A woman may find that piped water frees her from a burdensome task. Rather than finding more leisure time, traditions may require that she keep busy doing other things. Does this mean that her overall contributions to family well-being will increase? Maybe not.

12. Another dimension of household studies which is conceptually important but difficult to quantify is the magnitude and direction of exchanges in goods and services between household members. This dimension is particularly important in hypotheses on investments in the schooling of children, and on childbearing motivation. As yet no adequate methodology has been developed to assess these exchanges. We do know, however, that they are exceedingly complex and involve flows between older and younger siblings, as well as between members of wider extended family systems.

13. In studies assessing the wider impact of technical and social changes, exchanges of goods and services between one household and another may be particularly important. For example, it has been hypothesized that in rural India members of certain lower castes have resisted many reforms which would increase agricultural productivity in their communities because these reforms overall tended to threaten traditional reciprocity arrangements. The lower caste members would no longer have a right to subsistence incomes from the land owners in the community if their traditional roles in the productive process were altered.

14. One additional problem in research on both time allocation and exchanges of goods and services is that these dimensions change markedly in accord with an individual's age and position within the household structure. Thus, frameworks to study time allocation and exchange processes must take into account the household structure and its change over time.

#### What are the Output Variables?

15. As with regard to inputs the number of output variables is extensive indeed. It potentially includes all goods and services which families produce for consumption exchange or sale. There is a need, therefore, in any research on this topic to be selective. A useful guide might be to focus on some particular policy relevant outcome. Here are some examples:

- Internal consumption. Food preparation and its relation to nutrition is one variable which has received attention in this context.
- "Surplus" production for exchange or sale. The composition and magnitude of such surpluses are central to studies of peasant agriculture throughout the world.
- Children, as previously noted, may be considered something which the household produces and as sources of gratification and benefit which are consumed directly by other members of the household.

16. All of the above outputs present measurement problems. Nutrition can be measured only through careful observation of daily diets or indirectly through biomedical indicators. "Surplus production" can be quantified in terms of its market value, but this is difficult to do when exchanges are informal, outside the monetary system. But most difficult is the measurement of the demand for children. The number of children actually born in a household is only a very rough measure of the demand for children, since in societies where birth control is not practiced the number of children produced may simply not be a matter for individual decision making or planning.

#### How Should One Do The Research?

17. We leave this point open to discussion. In addition to the definitional and measurement problems outlined above, there are a number of practical and theoretical problems to be faced in actually setting up research projects. For example, assuming that we want to carry out a comparative study to better identify the variables which influence household structure, what kind of settings do we choose to compare? In addition, for any given problem of explanation, the household framework in itself will provide only part of the answer. In fertility studies how do normative factors, taboos on sexual matters, family planning program inputs, and the spread of political legitimacy for birth control bear upon contraceptive adoption, above and beyond the influence of household exchange patterns?

18. We may tentatively conclude that studying household variables may shed more light on various developmental issues and may even help in the evaluation or planning of development programs. However, the conceptual and methodological problems which face us in pursuing such research are of such a magnitude that our initial explorations in this area should have as their primary objective the development of methodologies to



study household structure and to test, in a very preliminary way whether hypotheses such as those outlined above correspond in any way to empirical reality.

19. We invite your comments on and additions to these preliminary notes.