

Sofa surfers and joint-custody children: new living arrangements and household surveys in the UK and France

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The practicalities of data collection and the need for meaningful data analysis and policy formulation require a social unit to be defined. The ‘household’ is almost universally used as this unit of survey enumeration, and is a “fact of life” for the analyst (van de Walle 2006), although practitioners from diverse disciplines (sociology, anthropology, demography, economics) have noted that the household as defined by survey practitioners may bear little resemblance to the social units in which people live and manage their lives (Rao 1992).

Household sample surveys are integral to planning in both rich and less developed contexts and there is a growing demand for demographic and socio-economic data to inform policies and interventions. A European drive towards harmonisation of key concepts in pan-European surveys generates divergent concerns about interpretation of household level data. Despite apparent harmonisation, European countries have subtly different interpretations of the central elements of the definition of private household and there is a clear lack of harmonisation both between surveys and countries (Hoffmeyer-Zlotnik and Warner 2008). Their subsequent concern is that harmonisation of definitions and instructions should be enforced more rigorously to facilitate international cross-country comparisons. However, even within Europe there may be very different cultural values attached to different forms of residence and intra- and inter-household support and dependency, and the impetus of harmonisation, obliging all nations to apply an identical definition may end up missing key situational differences. The harmonization of basic concepts like the household is important for international comparisons, and we need insight on what should be done to reflect better the reality experienced by a larger proportion of the population. There is a possible compromise between harmonization and reflection of diversity, and our study considers this.

The UN defines a household as *‘based on the arrangements made by persons, individually or in groups, for providing themselves with food or other essentials for living’* (Department of Economic and Social Affairs Statistics 1997). This develops out of a traditional Eurocentric ‘nuclear family’ ideology which resulted in equating household with family and seeing these as independent units functioning with few exchanges beyond. When forming the basis for data collection in contemporary Europe where divorce, remarriage, living apart together and other flexible domestic arrangements are becoming more widespread (Stillwell, Coast et al. 2009) a rigid application may seriously misrepresent both residence and intergenerational support.

There are wide-ranging ramifications of a definition taking the smallest existing residential/consumption group, which is often substantially smaller than the economic cooperating group: national sampling frames based on the census may generate potentially biased samples; this minimal 'household' is not useful for understanding social and economic dynamics at the level of the locally important social unit, itself also understood by researchers, analysts and policy makers to be something called a 'household'. By collecting data for households, an *a priori* and acontextual definition of the household forces conclusions to be drawn about something (a survey household), that in reality might not exist.

Beyond the household

Demographers stand somewhere between government statisticians who view the family as operating within a household (such as a nuclear family household or single parent household), and anthropologists and sociologists who have a wider conception of the family (Segalen 1993). Given that much of the data available across both Europe emanates from government sponsored surveys, national statistics offices' perceptions and concepts are clearly vital ingredients for what analysis of these surveys can generate. In France a new concept of a joined household refers to belonging to a group which joins individuals together by pooling resources, a group as much concerned with consumption as production. Joined households may cohabit, but it is more likely that such a unit is spread across several households and separated geographically. The notion of solidarity becomes located at the level of a group such as a joined household, whereas support may be more circumscribed but still not easily captured in generic household surveys.

This study

Our overall aim is to understand the implications of harmonizing definitions of the 'household' for survey data to represent the realities of new and emergent – spatially and temporally – living arrangements in Europe.

Objective:

To explore which new forms of living arrangements and households are captured and / or represented in household surveys and censuses in the UK and France.

We use 2 methods in order to achieve this objective, with data collected in the same way in both the UK and France in order to strengthen the comparative nature of this research:

Method 1: In-depth semi-structured interviews with a range of key informants in the UK (n=27) and France (n=18) involved in the design and production of household surveys and censuses, including:

- representatives of National Statistical Offices
- household survey interviewers
- data users / analysts from academia, civil society and government

Analysis 1: Content analysis of verbatim transcription of interviews.

Method 2: Detailed case study households (n=60) in the UK and France, producing qualitative data on living arrangements. The case study households were purposively selected in order to include households from African diaspora populations, and household with older (aged over 60 years) members

Analysis 2: An analysis of whether the households that people describe, on the basis of case studies, would be represented differently if standard survey household definitions were applied.

We situate our findings against a context of general observations of news items and events pertinent to our research, which provide clues as to emergent forms of living arrangements.

Preliminary findings

Even in a small purposive sample of different population subgroups we find considerable variation in the extent to which understanding of household meshes with what data are collected in the UK.

We find diverse understandings of ‘household’ according to respondents’ backgrounds, training and professional interest. There is significant variation between data collection practices in Anglophone and Francophone environments and the extent to which analysts and users are aware of such differences. For example, in France, the 2011 Enquête Famille et Logements associated with the census round allow the identification of multiple household membership of children who are cared for by multiple adults (eg: divorced/ separated parents, grandparents), reflecting these complex caring arrangements. In the UK, such multiple household membership is not recognised in the census. We find differentials in the extent to which data analysts and users are aware of different approaches, with this awareness particularly low in France.

We identify specific population sub-groups that are likely to be poorly captured and represented by household surveys, including:

UK & France

- people who live temporarily, often as a result of a critical change (eg:divorce), with others (“sofa surfers”)
- children who are cared for by multiple households, for example, joint custody from divorced/separated parents or care provided by grandparents

UK

- living in private rented tenancy accommodation
- co-residing in unofficial accommodation (eg: garden sheds used for multiple occupancy)
- who see their pets as key members of their household

France:

- Dual earner couples who live apart during the working week (dispersed households)

- Retired couples (or not) living separately each one in their dwelling house (Living Apart Together - LAT)
- Individuals with more than one residence
- Young adults who still live at home with their parents
- Illegal migrants (without residence permit)

We illustrate these examples using detailed case studies drawn from our primary fieldwork. These groups vary between the UK and France in terms of how they were perceived (or mentioned) by our key informants. Our key informant interviews also point towards ways in which the increasing administration of household surveys using technology (eg: phone, internet-based household surveys) rather than face-to-face interviews involving an interviewer, might lead to further exclusion of some population sub-groups, or at least, very poor information being collected from them.

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