

Household Strategies: their conceptual relevance and analytical scope in social research

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Abstract

The paper considers the idea of 'household strategies' as a *concept* that takes into account the motivations and agency of actors in society, as a *method of analysis* through looking at the intersection of different economies in household behaviour and as a *unit of analysis*, with a focus on households rather than individuals. Although the concept of household strategies has been criticised in each of these dimensions, it has nevertheless remained an important empirical tool of investigation in different parts of the world. Indeed, household strategies have become perhaps even more salient under conditions of social change such as those found in studies of post-Communism as well as so-called post-Fordism. The danger of an over-emphasis on agency implied by this approach can be counteracted by considering structural factors which have emerged in empirical studies and which constrain the creation and deployment of household strategies. However, such constraints are not just objective but also culturally defined. Seen in this way, household strategies can be developed as an aspect of comparative research and can help to elucidate the social factors underlying economic behaviour. The paper ends by suggesting certain conditions under which household strategies are likely to become especially important.

'Household strategies' was a concept used first of all in studies of Latin America and Africa where the informal economy was at least as important as the formal economy in understanding every day economic behaviour among the urban poor (Hart 1973, Castells and Portes 1989, Roberts 1991). It was later used as a concept in several empirical investigations of Britain in the 1980s, including the so-called Sheppey-project, as a way of looking at the impact of economic change, especially unemployment (Pahl 1984). A considerable debate ignited around the concept because it is an approach that emphasised agency rather than structure, the household rather than the individual as the unit of analysis and informal/domestic work rather than formal employment alone. This tended to challenge many dominant sociological paradigms of social structure and social change and was extensively criticised in the pages of *Sociology* as well as elsewhere. Nevertheless, the idea of household strategies has enjoyed a recent revival in studies of post-Communist countries in Eastern and Central Europe, where it has been used as a key indicator of the emerging social structure and in studies that have focused upon the impact of the post-Fordist restructuring upon family and work. This suggests certain conditions under which the idea of household strategies may become once more relevant.

In this paper I argue that the concept of household strategies can be relevant for the analysis of aspects of complex industrial societies as well as transitional societies in a way that enables us to better understand the social foundations of economic behaviour. However, we need to take into account the various social and cultural contexts in which such strategies are formed. Used in this way, the concept of household strategies can become a useful tool for the comparative analysis of different societies and social groups.

The debate about household strategies

The concept of household strategies was used at first mainly to apply to specific social groups, ones that must draw on a range of resources in the struggle to survive in a risky environment. Hence, people in marginal positions, peasants, small business and farm families or immigrant entrepreneurs were said to have 'strategies' in this sense (Redclift 1986, Pile 1991, Portes 1994). These were often termed 'survival' or 'coping' strategies.

However, when Pahl and Gershuny introduced the concept into the study of households on the Isle of Sheppey it was applied to *all* households. Their focus was mainly on work as an aspect of household strategies (Gershuny and Pahl 1979, Gershuny 1978, Pahl 1984, Pahl 1980, Wallace and Pahl 1985). At that time it was a reaction to the Marxist structuralism that had dominated academic paradigms and which focused attention on the societal level of reproduction in which the motivations of social actors were not very relevant. The idea of household strategies by contrast, focused upon social actors and was therefore a 'bottom up' perspective. The concept was used to imply that the strategies of households could shape the environment instead of only being shaped by it. The

concept used by these authors drew upon a wider definition of work than was usual at the time, drawing upon studies of the informal economy and the insights provided by feminists into the nature of domestic work (Allen, Waton, Purcell and Wood 1986, Oakley 1974). In this broader definition, work was regarded as meaningful activity, embedded in social relationships and could encompass a range of activities not much studied by economists or sociologists hitherto (Morris 1990 and 1997).

However, Pahl and Gershuny stressed that household strategies should be seen in the context of general social change. Gershuny argued from a 'macro' social perspective that a 'self service' society was emerging where services were performed in the formal, the underground or in the household economy as a process of historical transformation. Pahl, arguing from a micro-level perspective, emphasised that such decisions were not only the product of abstract external forces such as 'capitalism' but could also be the consequence of active choices: people may prefer to produce their own services or goods at home as a creative activity. This was perhaps his most controversial point, but one which has turned out to be important in subsequent studies.

The idea was operationalised in a study of the Isle of Sheppey, a location chosen because it represented the experience of a range of structural changes, including de-industrialisation, which were taking place in Britain at that time. However, the researchers did not find that one kind of work was a substitute for another and households did not behave in ways that could be predicted *a priori* from assumptions about rational economic behaviour. Rather than unemployed households turning towards self-provisioning and the informal economy, formal employment had a multiplier effect: those households where there were many workers were also the ones likely to be active in informal work and there was thus a tendency towards a polarisation between 'work rich' and 'work poor' households (Pahl 1988). Similar findings emerge in later studies by Nelson and Smith (1999) and by Clarke (1999).

The Sheppey study inspired a range of similar studies as well as critical responses that focused upon household strategies either as a concept or as a method of analysis or as a unit of analysis.

1. Household strategies as a concept

In an influential article in *Sociology*, Graham Crow (1989) questioned the notion of 'strategy' and analysed its link with game theory. His careful rumination over the idea sparked off a whole debate, much of which centred upon whether the rationality or active agency implied by the word 'strategy' was justified (for review of these debates see Wallace 1991). For example, for post-structuralist theorists, the concept of strategy imposes upon social actors a discourse derived from military and business environments. In their view, individual actors are only 'constructed' through this discourse rather than constructing it themselves.

'By taking the language of strategy in an uncritical manner sociologists are contributing unintentionally to the spread and expansion of a multiplicity of these power discourses and practices. For there is little doubt that strategy operates as a power that normalises and individualises those who are subject to it; not only does it force them to act strategically and take responsibility for their own strategies, it actually transforms individuals into subjects who secure their own sense of meaning and reality through the discourse of strategy' (Knights and Morgan 1990: 481-2)

Despite the validity of this criticism, strategies are phenomena that seem to emerge recurrently in social research in different parts of the world, sometimes without apparent links between them. Is it really the case that this construct is merely imposed on respondents by researchers? Or are there some underlying trends that make household strategies more visible and relevant? The importance of the concept of strategy is that it is based upon the assumption that one must ask households or individuals themselves what they are doing in order to understand how they make sense of their own environment. It is therefore an inductive concept grounded in certain kinds of empirical research.

It has been suggested that only some households had strategies. Anderson, Bechhofer, Kendrick and colleagues (1994) as well as McCrone (1994) in their study of families in Scotland argued that only better off households perceived themselves as having control over resources and were thus able to make choices and to plan strategies whilst others did not. Moreover, people behaved more or less strategically at different points in the life-course. At certain stages it was necessary to plan (for housing, children etc.) and at other stages it was not. Other researchers however, saw it the other way round: only poor households had to develop strategies in the struggle for survival (Vinay 1985).

Although it is possible to resort to the weaker idea of 'practices' or 'behaviour', meaning simply what is done in the household rather than implying any rational thinking about it, many researchers find household strategies to be a useful concept in understanding household economic behaviour, because it steers a course between the Scylla of the 'oversocialised' conception of the individual criticised by Granovetter (1985) and the Charybdis of the calculating and resource-optimising *homo economicus* which is assumed in many economic models. However, in choosing this course, we should also take into consideration the more sociological variations in the norms and cultures that constrain human behaviour. If viewed in this way, the study of household strategies can be a way of understanding the interaction of structure and agency (Morgan 1989).

Alan Warde (1990) suggests a useful way forward by proposing that there is both a *strong* and a *weak* definition of strategy. The 'strong' definition is that households really do sit and plan their activities, an idea which he found unsustainable. The 'weak' definition, by contrast, is that a strategy of some sort can be inferred from a given household outcome and this is the definition that he himself

uses. Thus the fact that households had managed to organise various sources of formal, informal and household labour could be taken as evidence of a strategy, whether it was consciously planned or not. However, Warde admits that he is limited by his methods - that of a survey - which cannot elucidate the reasoning around any 'strategy' by a household. In this respect the strong definition of strategy is more amenable to the kind of qualitative interviews carried out for example by McCrone (1994) or Wallman (1984) which allow respondents to explain their rationality. For some researchers, it was essential to retain the strong definition of strategies as this could help to understand how people cope with varying demands upon them and how they perceive those demands. Edwards and Ribbens even argue that this is a kind of 'empowerment' for their female respondents whose voices are otherwise unheard (1991). The extent to which a strong or a weak definition is used therefore seems to depend upon the research methods adopted.

In British sociology, the idea of household strategies has provoked fierce criticism from sociologists still using structuralist or post-structuralist perspectives who emphasise structure at the expense of agency in social life. On the other hand, empirical sociologists find it a useful concept because it enables them to make sense of the kinds of interviews that they conduct. Here the emphasis is more on agency. There were also some cautious apologists for the concept who argued that it might have limited validity only (Anderson et al. 1994, Warde 1990). However, as we shall see later, some aspects of social change in a range of contemporary societies have indeed forced households to become more self-conscious and reflexive in the way that they organise their resources and this is where household strategies as a concept can continue to have analytical value.

2. Household strategies as a method of analysis

A second theme to emerge is the idea of household strategies as a method of analysis, particularly for understanding the combinations of formal, informal and household work and the divisions of labour between them. Sometimes this includes only those activities that are not regulated by the state (or which avoid state regulation) and sometimes this can mean forms of reciprocal or unpaid exchange between households or household production otherwise known as self-provisioning (Pahl and Wallace 1985). In this sense, household strategy has been used in different contexts all over the world including Latin America (Roberts 1991), Hungary (Sik 1993) and Italy (Mingione 1988, Vinay 1985). Despite the persuasive criticisms of the idea of 'informal economy' (see Harding and Jenkins, 1989), the economic survival of households in some contexts such as certain post-communist countries (Rose and Haerpfer 1992, Piirainen 1997) or Soviet-style systems (Sik 1993, Wedel 1986 and 1992), or developing countries where there is no state support (Roberts 1991) are difficult to explain without some recourse to this terminology.

Since the informal sector is difficult to study using conventional methods of analysis, such as surveys, secondary sources and so on, it means that sociologists have had to look in more detail at the

practices of households and at the way in which economic relationships are socially embedded (Granovetter 1985). In other words, this involves using a more substantivist or anthropological approach to the issue in research. Such practices are governed not so much by formal as by informal rules and these need to become the object of analysis. Activities in different economic spheres (sometimes called 'economies') such as the home, the community, the black market and so on, imply different kinds of rationality and rules of exchange. Household strategies can be one method of analysis for illuminating this.

Another controversial claim made by Ray Pahl was that household strategies could be method for analysing social structure (Pahl 1988). This was heavily attacked by those with a vested interest in the more conventional approach of seeing social structure as determining household values rather than vice versa (see Pahl 1989 and the debate in that edition of the *International Journal for Urban and Regional Research*. See also Crompton 1993, Goldthorpe and Marshall 1992, Evans 1992).

3. Household strategies as a unit of analysis

For economists as well as for certain sociologists, the household has been an important unit of analysis. Whereas sociologists agonise about the extent to which strategies can be discovered or imputed, in the 'New Home Economics' (Becker, 1965) the strategy of each household is assumed by economists even it is not evident to the members of the household. In this perspective, the household is assumed to behave in a rationally strategising manner, with women for example, going to work in the labour market only when it is strategically optimal - that is, when their human capital is sufficiently high to make it worthwhile in a complementary fashion to the partner's earning potential. Many have tried to adapt this model sociologically (see for example Pollack 1985, Brines 1993, Robinson 1977, Berk and Berk 1979).

Of course, in these perspectives such behaviour was assumed *a priori* rather than being inducted from empirical research - in other words it is *deductively* discovered. This modelling of economic behaviour stands in contrast to the sociological and anthropological perspectives that see households as having a range of economic and non-economic goals, which may guide their actions and which should be the subject of empirical investigation - perspectives that are more *inductive*.

Many sociological studies have focused upon the household, in order to consider which circumstances, such as the entry of women into the paid workforce, might lead to a change in the domestic division of labour (Godwin 1991, Meissner, Humphreys, Mies and Scheu 1975, Gershuny, Godwin and Jones 1994, Baxter 1992, Baxter and Western 1998). Studies emphasising gender have tended to criticise the assumption (implied by the term household strategies) that there is a consensus within the household as to what the strategy is and that it represents the interests of all household members (see for example Nelson and Smith 1999). Thus, women's strategies and

interests would often conflict with those of men and any analysis of households should take the patriarchal hierarchy of power both inside and outside the household into account (Smith 1986).

Both the economic and the sociological analysis have often focused upon household strategies as means by which to understand economic behaviour. However, this often tends to assume a rather limited view of what a household is (usually a heterosexual couple family), to ignore the role of other family members (e.g. children, grandparents, domestic helpers, nannies etc.). Furthermore, they tend to assume that a household is synonymous with a family, even though the number of non-standard family or non-family households is increasing. A number of these assumptions are being empirically as well as theoretically challenged. These assumptions can make some approaches culturally limited in its scope - applicable only to particular societies and particular social and ethnic groups. Furthermore, they leave out the differences in what households perceive to be necessary work, which may be governed by very varying 'sub cultures' within the family (Anderson et al. 1994).

The household remains a useful unit of analysis, although this term should be flexible enough to include a variety of different family forms and differently related, as well as non-related, members. It should also be flexible enough to take into account the different interests as well as individual strategies of its members and should not assume that the household strategy is based upon consensus. In most societies, most people live in households of one kind or other and the organisation and management of the household activity is an important requirement for the reproduction of the society from day to day and from generation to generation. It must involve some common understanding between the people living there. However, the household is a social as well as an economic unit and therefore should be studied also in terms of these norms, cultures and values. There therefore seems to be a strong case for looking at the household rather than the individual as a unit of analysis whilst taking these critical factors into account.

The re-emergence of household strategies

Whatever attacks the concept of household strategies has suffered in Britain, the concept seems to recur independently in studies in different parts of the world. Here, I focus upon two important contexts in which the household strategies have resurfaced: that of post-communism on the one hand that of post-Fordism on the other.

a. Post-Communism

When the relatively stable Communist societies were disrupted by the penetration of market capitalism from the end of the 1980s onwards, people were thrown into a maelstrom of change in which their living standards slumped dramatically, their savings were eroded by inflation and many lost their jobs or went unpaid for long periods of time. The former social structures started to

disintegrate, new wealth emerged and previously prestigious occupations, such as Communist Party *nomenklatura*, disappeared. Households are thrown onto their own resources in order to survive or in order to progress improve themselves (Walker 1998). Under these circumstances, where conditions change very rapidly, household strategies can be one of the main ways of understanding what is happening in practice.

In these studies of post-communist societies, Rose and Haerpfer (1992), for example, have implemented a 'weak' version of the concept, whilst Bridges and Pine (1998) or Piirainen (1997) the 'strong' version (mostly reflecting their different methodological approaches). Both sets of commentators have argued that in post-communist societies, households need to use a whole range of resources in and out of the formal sector in order to get by.

For Rose and Haerpfer, the inadequacy of official statistics about economic behaviour in this context, along with the fact that incomes do not necessarily reflect socio-economic status, mean that new social categories should be constructed from the combinations of different kinds of work - that is, from the strategies of the households - in order to understand social structure, especially who is advantaged and who is disadvantaged. Their classification, based upon a large data set of 10 countries divides the households between those who are 'defensive', 'enterprising', 'marginal' and 'vulnerable' (Rose and Haerpfer 1992).

It is suggested by Kolankiewicz (1996), that under these circumstances the personal resources of the household and the way in which they are manipulated is crucial for understanding the emerging stratification system. This point is made even more strongly in a recent book by Timo Piirainen (1997), who in his interviews with 100 households in St. Petersburg, found that the household strategy actually determines the future social status of the household. He identifies three economies: the traditional Soviet economy, which still survives in some form, the informal economy which survives from former times but has also been transformed in the new conditions and the market economy which has imperfectly penetrated many spheres of life in Russia. Household strategies may be identified by the extent to which they use all or some of these economies and here he identifies three strategies. First, there is the 'market-oriented' strategy, which is oriented towards the market economy and leads to an emerging middle class. The second category is the 'traditional-defensive' category, which uses 'traditional' soviet-era techniques of combining the Soviet supplemented with informal economic activities (growing vegetables, using favours) to get by. The third category he identifies as the 'proletarian strategy' and these people rely only upon the Soviet economy to manage. These families are likely to form a poverty-stricken underclass. For Piirainen, household strategies is used as a concept, a method of analysis and as a unit of analysis.

For Piirainen and Kolankiewicz therefore, the strategy is a more active one based upon the rational calculations of the households in a risky and uncertain environment. Not only is the structure of

society somewhat opaque for sociologists as well as for social actors themselves, but also it is also unclear how it can best be investigated since traditional measures (for example of income) are not appropriate. This gap is then filled by investigation of household strategies. Indeed, Timo Piirainen argues that because the social structure is so fluid and chaotic in Russia at the present time that it is only by looking at this micro-social level of household strategies is it possible to understand what is going on. Thus, he proposes that rather than social structure determining social action, in Russia we have the reverse: agency determining structure (see also Pahl's argument cited earlier). However, there is once again the danger of over-emphasising agency. Indeed, Pahl himself (1996) in his commentary on Kolankiewicz, indicated that voluntary strategies alone are not sufficient to explain social structure - we need to take into account a more macro-level factors outside of the household as well.

What is clear from these new accounts is that household strategies are not just a method for 'getting by' but can also be used as a method for improving the status of the household, for social climbing. This is evident in the distinction that McCrone (1994) drew between 'getting by' and 'making out', but seems to be even more important in the Russian context. Household strategies can have different implications in relatively stable societies (where they may be less important since more established forms of social and economic reproduction exist) than in unstable societies. Where traditional forms of social and economic reproduction break down they can become more important.

Simon Clarke and his colleagues (1999) also use the idea of household strategies in this context to understand how households survive or even improve their position using different economies in Russia. Although critical of the voluntarism implied by the concept of strategy, he nevertheless attributes the extensive self-provisioning on small domestic plots of land to a culturally normative preference. He is also critical of the household as a unit of analysis but nevertheless finds that households are the important basic unit of economic activity, even if individuals within the household have different strategies from one another. Thus, although Clarke doesn't much like the idea of household strategies, he cannot drop it. We should point out that a household strategy does not necessarily mean that the members of the household either like each other or even talk to each other. In my own empirical research it was clear that households could build strategies around strong antipathies but nevertheless organise the division of tasks and resources amongst the household members.

b. Post-Fordism

A further set of studies where the idea of household strategies have emerged is in the analysis of what has been termed "post Fordism". By this, what is implied is the attenuation of conventional life-long full-time employment based upon families with a male breadwinner and the organisation of welfare resources (pensions, health insurance etc.) that goes with it (Kumar 1995). It is argued that as this

Fordist career and family model is replaced by more flexible kinds of employment, with more fragmented life trajectories, the informalisation of parts of the economy and the large scale entry of women in the workforce, so household strategies become important for putting together a complex set of responsibilities (Mingione 1994, Nelson and Smith 1999, Hochschild 1997, Buck, Gershuny, Rose and Scott 1993). This is associated with people having to take on 'portfolios' of jobs including part-time work and moonlighting as well as full time jobs, which have to be managed around domestic responsibilities. This is also encouraged by the fragmentation, privatisation and contracting out of the welfare state (Penna and O'Brien 1996). States under financial pressure retrench on welfare provision, leaving people more and more to their own resources. Furthermore, households must learn to manage pensions, insurance, education and health, as these collective goods become more and more the responsibility of households rather than the state.

The entry of women into the workforce means that the many of the tasks which they previously did at home as part of their 'natural' caring role, become rationalised and outsourced. The home becomes like a workplace (Hochschild 1997). Thus, Gershuny and Pahl's (1979) original model by which different tasks would move in and out of different spheres - the household, the community and the formal economy - is now even more relevant. Indeed, it is becoming apparent that almost any domestic task - such as writing Christmas cards, caring for children, ironing and cleaning, shopping for clothes, designing a garden or walking the dog - can be contracted out into the formal, social or informal economies. Paradoxically, the justification may be to spend more 'quality time' with other household members or to do other kinds of 'self provisioning' activities such as making pasta or gardening (Gregson and Lowe 1994). This can reflect either material necessities or preferences. However, the possibility of sub-contracting work on this way depends upon the characteristics of the formal and informal labour market in the locality from where comes the supply of domestic workers as well as the demand for their services (Sassen 1996). It also depends upon cultural norms and values as to what one should do oneself and what can be contracted out. Therefore there is an interaction between decisions and choices made by the individual household and the context in which they are situated; the two intersect with one another.

Whilst some of these strategies are forced upon households by the new international economy and the crisis of the Fordist work society, we cannot just assume that households will adopt the most economically resource maximising strategy. Social and cultural factors as well as values must be taken into account if we use household strategies as a method of analysis. Thus, for example, whilst the working class households in the study by Joan Smith and Margaret Nelson (1999) often justified self provisioning (including growing vegetables and house building) in terms of economic rationality, they note that the returns on time and equipment invested were low and it was often simply a way of bolstering a threatened male identity. In Simon Clarke's Russian households it was also the case that non-economically worthwhile behaviour such as growing vegetables on domestic plots was rationalised economically. In both cases satisfaction and creativity were important factors for

undertaking this kind of activity. Furthermore, the organisation of household resources as strategies illustrated the fact that one kind of work was not just a substitute for another - we have to understand the contextual rationality of the household in order to understand how this takes place, rather than just infer it from abstract models.

In an age of increasing 'post-materialism' (Inglehart 1997), many household strategies are based upon alternative values such as the search for more satisfactory life styles, leisure time or the desire to live in an environmentally friendly way (Littig forthcoming, Offe 1996). Some people search for meaningful ways to live and to organise their lives including 'down shifting' or striving for more quality time for themselves or with their partners or for the opportunity to pursue hobbies and interests (Hörning, Gerhard and Michailow 1995) or by developing alternative forms of work exchanges such as LETS (Williams 1996, Offe 1992). Furthermore, consumer goals and lifestyles can play an important as households differentiate themselves according to taste and consumption (Butler and Savage 1995, Bourdieu 1984). In such circumstances the study of strategies as a concept is fully justified because people need to reflect upon their use of time and resources. However, it is often the case that the household rather than the individual is also important as a unit of analysis, although this dimension is usually neglected in such studies.

Thus, we find that in the context of different kinds of restructuring - either post-Communist or post-Fordist, where there are changes in both the formal economy and the informal economies household strategies remains important as a *concept*, since without understanding the agency of households we cannot understand why certain strategies emerge and not others, as a *unit of analysis* since restructuring affects all household members and their interactions as well as the situation of the household in the social structure as a whole and finally as a *method of analysis* since in all the studies cited, looking only at the gainful employment of one or other household members would not have explained how the household managed in general.

However, this also illustrates another important factor which we would need to take into account in using the concept of household strategies and that is the values and culture around which a strategy (or indeed, a household) are formed. Here we need to understand the way in which households *perceive* the resources around which they organise their strategies. This can be illustrated with two case studies drawn from different levels of North American society. One a study conducted in Worcester Massachusetts amongst relatively affluent families and the other in Los Angeles amongst poor immigrant women. In each of these studies the focus of research is the woman in the household and her strategies for using household resources in such a way as to manage working and domestic life as well as the care of children. Elisabeth Mueller (1994) considered the situation of immigrant women in Los Angeles where the household consists of a range of people, not just couple families, and where it is traditionally expected that women perform all the domestic household work, but work in the labour market as well (Mueller 1994). By making men responsible for taking them to

and from work or by sharing the domestic work with other female household members it was possible for these women to manage the different demands of a job and a home. The really disadvantaged women were those with no other female household members with whom to share the work. These women took jobs such as domestic cleaner because in that way they were able to prioritise their responsibilities in the home.

A contrasting example comes from a study of affluent urban families in Massachusetts by Pratt and Hanson (1991). Among these households there was a strong ideology that only parents should care for children and so parents arranged their working hours so that there was always one parent at home. It would have been unacceptable for them to turn to the market for regular childcare services, although unlike the immigrant women described by Mueller, the women were able to make their male spouses do substantial amounts of domestic work and childcare. These women very actively scheduled their time and resources to achieve the goals they wanted - to maintain a family and a challenging job in the labour market.

There are many other studies of such household strategies in Britain (Morris and Irwin 1992) Ireland (Leonard 1992), Canada (Hessing 1994), Italy (Vinay 1985), the Czech Republic (Mikova 1992) and Ukraine (Walker 1998). However, what emerges from just these two accounts is that the structural givens around which the strategies are composed are culturally variable. Thus for the Latino women, the sexual division of labour was an immovable given around which they had to work, whilst for the Massachusetts households it was more flexible, even if the women were mainly responsible for managing it.

In all these contexts, even if only one person in the household was interviewed, it was clear that the strategy took into account other household members. The household remains the basic unit for getting by. By looking at the world from the perspective of household strategies rather than from the traditional perspective of the occupation and rewards of the single income earner or head of household, different factors in prosperity and hardship, success and failure emerge. What also emerges is that for women the strategies involved not just work, but the administration and management of time and other resources. In addition their strategies interacted with the labour and housing markets in determining where they wanted to live and what sort of jobs they could do. Therefore, the comparative study of household strategies can illuminate which structural factors are important for households. This issue of comparative contexts is the one I turn to next.

Household strategies in comparative perspective

Although until now I have considered mainly isolated case studies, the study of household strategies as a concept, a method of analysis and a unit of analysis can help us to understand social changes in different societies around the world. This is because it can help us to understand which resources

are important to different groups of people and also how those resources are used and combined. The studies cited above make it clear that we should not make any assumptions that we know what economically rational behaviour is in any given circumstance, nor that people would necessarily behave in this way, no matter how limited their resources are.

The studies cited above would indicate that at the macro level we would need to take into account the following factors: Firstly, the *different economies* (market economy, Soviet economy and informal economy, social economy, alternative green economy etc.). Here we mean not so much that households exist in completely separate economies, but rather the way in which activities in different economic sectors are combined within the household (Rose and Haerpfer 1992, Piirainen 1997, Pahl 1980, Vinay 1985). Often these different economies require different kinds of behaviour and values even if they can all be termed 'economic' in some sense. Secondly, the *housing market* (Anderson et al. 1994, Pratt and Hanson 1991), thirdly the nature of the *labour market*, fourthly, *civic and welfare rights* (Roberts 1991) and finally *cultures, norms, values* or in other words, what is considered acceptable in any given context and around which a household strategy can be organised. This list is not exhaustive. Clearly, different societies would throw up different factors as being important. Or one or the other of the above factors may become more or less important. However, these structural factors would suggest a first point of departure for comparison both between and within societies.

Bryan Roberts (1991) has tried to identify these environments more precisely in order to present them as material for possible cross-national comparative research and in order to explain why household strategies take different forms in different countries. He argues that where a welfare regime is well established and stable, households are likely to fight for collective rights and to manipulate resources around what they receive from the state, as in many western European countries, whereas in other environments such as Latin America where such rights are largely missing, they will resort to more individualised strategies except when there are land invasions or other reasons to work collectively. In the USA, on the other hand, where collective rights are limited, and where households and families are fragmented, people will develop more individual strategies. Mingione (1994) also indicates that the extent of family solidarity in a household strategy can also be culturally variable - in Italy it happens to be especially high.

Even given the variable contexts presented by these factors, households themselves may be more or less active. Thus, in each study, the authors identified active, improving strategies as against more defensive strategies. It seems that in each place where such research is carried out, some households are more enterprising, some more defensive. Some depend upon a strong sense and some depend upon a weak sense of strategy. However, we are arguing that households do not simply respond to structural changes, but rather, put resources together and transform them once more in their own way in interaction with other household members. Some households may tend to

create self-consciously alternative work styles by using LETS or by trying to live according to environmentally-friendly criteria. Other households may try to maximise their consumer potential by using the resources of different household members and the housing market to improve their position. Yet others may simply seek to survive in an uncertain world. But the motivations and strategies of household members and the resulting household unit is important for making sense of economic activities. Who uses the different economies within the household and the ways in which they are combined is an open question that must be subject to empirical investigation because we cannot presume to know what values or priorities households may hold.

However, based upon the analysis of the studies above, we can suggest some tentative hypotheses as to which circumstances would tend to make household strategies more important:

1. The more women enter into the labour force, the more household strategies are likely to become more important. This is because the tasks that were previously carried out as a natural part of women's role need to be rationalised and in many cases are outsourced. The household as a unit of analysis is highly relevant here because household tasks may or may not be reallocated among different household and/or family members (i.e. household strategy as a concept and a unit of analysis are relevant).
2. Where a society is subject to rapid social change, leaving households in a situation of risk and uncertainty, household strategies are likely to become more important. This is because households are forced to become reflexive and draw upon different resources in order both to thrive and to survive. Such circumstances can be found in post-Communist countries as well as under certain conditions of post-Fordism (i.e. household strategy as a concept and as a unit of analysis are relevant).
3. Where large parts of the economy are informal or becoming informalised (as is the case in developing countries and in the post-Communist countries), household strategies are likely to become more important. This is because households have to draw upon a range of resources both within and outside the household in order to manage their economic and social reproduction (i.e. household strategies as a method of analysis is relevant).

Conclusions

In this paper I have considered the criticisms and debates surrounding the idea of household strategies. Although subject to considerable criticism at the time, the idea of household strategies has perennially resurfaced as a concept, a method of analysis and a unit of analysis in studying social life in different parts of the world. The attraction of the concept is that it enables us to consider the agency of social actors and the way in which they may use all forms of work in organising their lives.

It also enables research to take into account the actor's or household's point of view. Looking at the various structural and cultural circumstances in which they operate and how household members perceive that environment can counteract the implicit danger of over-emphasising the agency, voluntarism and self-consciousness of households implied by the concept. This can best be illuminated by comparative research. However, I have suggested three general conditions which can account for the continuing recurrence of household strategies as a research concept and which are likely to continue to make such a concept important.

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In the revisions to this article I have undertaken the following:

1. I have shortened the introduction
2. I have focused the paper more consistently around the idea of household strategies as a concept, method of analysis and unit of analysis
3. I have written about household strategies rather than household work strategies as this is more consistent with the literature I am reviewing.
4. I have focused more clearly on the value of household strategies in specific contexts and in comparative analysis
5. I have deleted the section on "new times, new strategies" altogether as being rather too vague and glib according to one referee and focused on concrete empirical case studies instead as suggested by the referees.
6. I have up-dated the material with two relevant new books - those by Simon Clarke and Joan Smith.
7. I have cut the paper by nearly 2000 words.

Unfortunately, I am just outside the 9 month deadline for revisions. However, this is not a new paper, but rather one that is responding to the criticisms made on the earlier version rather than a new paper. I have not included discussion of some of the references referred to by one of the referees, interesting though they are, because I was trying to cut the text rather than expand it, so many references have also been cut. Instead I have concentrated on a few very specific examples.