The Household in Flux
Plasticity Complicates the Unit of Analysis

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ABSTRACT: The household is a ubiquitous unit of analysis across the social sciences. In policy, research and practice, households are often considered a link between individuals and the structures that they interact with on a daily basis. Yet, researchers often take the household for granted as something that means the same thing to everyone across contexts. As the household has never truly been a static unit of analysis, we need to revisit the household to ensure that we are still capturing what it means to be part of a household – especially if we are engaging in research where we aim to compare households across time and space. We analyse how the concept of the household has been used over time and identify areas, such as migration and urbanisation, where we need to ensure conceptual clarity. We use our field notes and ethnographic interviews to show the challenges of such an analysis.

KEYWORDS: coping, demography, gender, household, migration, urbanisation

The household is a ubiquitous unit of analysis and debate for anthropologists and other social scientists (Bender 1967, 1971; Clignet and Sween 1974; Dressler et al. 1985; Netting et al. 1984). It is also often the unit by which policy-makers and social service providing agencies render services to the public. Robert Netting and colleagues (1984), whose work is often considered foundational reading for anthropologists using the household as their unit of analysis, suggested that the household should not be seen as a static unit of observation, but rather as an analytic category that holds a great deal of potential. In other words, they argued that anthropologists should not take the household as a unit of analysis for granted as meaning the same for everyone across time and space. The household is never a static unit, and there is considerable variation in what a household looks like across contexts. The composition of a household fluctuates not only longitudinally, but also seasonally in the case of a blended family in the United States, or by situation in the case of the inclusion of an individual for meals and housing but not for direct financial resources. Household fluidity, as understood by social scientists, is discordant with the approaches of policy-makers and social service providing agencies. We examine this dissonance in order to emphasise the need for clarity in the analysis and dissemination of research findings.

In many ways, a household is similar to a biological organism, in that it adapts and changes over time. Just as a child grows and changes into a teenager and then emerges into adulthood, so the study of this individual’s mental stability, for example, requires multiple data collection points and a clear understanding of their place in their life cycle. The child at seven years may look stable and well-adjusted but then appear to be much less so during their adolescent storms. Analysis of the mental health of children must include context to avoid incorrect results; households, too, require explanation and context.

Despite the household being the unit of analysis of much research and the focus of much social policy, the definition of what constitutes a household varies considerably across the anthropological and broader social science literature. Sara Randall and colleagues (2011) argue that this is problematic in so far as the
social units and realities of households are rarely adequately captured in the numerous surveys that use the household as their unit of analysis. Furthermore, the researcher’s definition of a household is rarely made explicit, leaving a lack of clarity as to whose household is being referred to. Not only are there cultural and contextual differences between households from place to place, but even within and across disciplines social scientists conceive of households in different ways, leaving less room for the ability to compare results across studies (Randall et al. 2011). This lack of consistency and clarity in the definition of the household means that many comparative studies are not comparing the same units and that the analyses drawn from the etic perspective of the researcher and their conceptualisation of a household suffer from a categorical fallacy.

Understanding how households cope with and adapt to a variety of stressors is a major theme across the household literature. The focus on the plasticity of the household has two primary perspectives. First, much of the international research, with some exceptions (see Anand and Rademacher 2011 and the urban literature referenced below) focuses on rural livelihoods and how livelihoods affect or influence attributes of the household, such as health or the relationship with the overall political economy (Durrenberger and Tannenbaum 1992; Leatherman 2005; Nash 1993). Second, as various forms of human migration change and remain connected through social media and remittances, social scientists need to reflect on how migration poses unique challenges to the household as a unit of analysis that warrants further reflection. Research based in North America is commonly related to household challenges and resiliency, such as food insecurity or housing inequality, and leans towards urban populations (e.g. Chilton et al. 2009; Meenar 2017). However, the researcher’s or policy-maker’s reflections on these broader contextual changes and their effects upon household structure are not as prevalent in research based in the United States.

Appreciation of household plasticity should play an important role in analysing the needs of a household and its internal stressors. Rather than being presented as static snapshots, household issues need to be conceptualised as fluid and processual. Long-term results of these constant shifts must be considered. A household is the foundational space for social development (Cohen and Sirkeci 2011) and enacting culture (Bourdieu 1977). To set an agenda for discussion of this issue, in this article we examine literature on the topic and then weave in specific examples from our own work: Kelly Yotebieng’s fieldwork with Rwandan urban refugee households in Cameroon and excerpts from Tannya Forcone’s ethnographic work with food insecurity and impoverished households in urban and suburban Ohio illustrate some of the challenges in conceptualising the household. Our experiences underline both the challenges and relevance of continuously revisiting and making explicit the terms by which we define this ubiquitous unit of analysis across anthropological research, as Netting and colleagues (1984) emphasised in their foundational work on the household.

Relevant Themes in the Household Literature

Who Makes Up a Household?

Robert Netting was a leading authority on household structures, and he studied them using a cultural-ecological framework. He suggested that households were sensitive to external socio-economic conditions and that household compositions changed in order to adapt to changing societal conditions (Netting 1979). Netting and colleagues (1984) used the cultural-ecological approach as an attempt to link the forms of households to correspond with their unique needs within the types of societies in which they are found. Others suggest different but equally broad conceptualisations. Lola Bautista (2011: 68) refers to households as ‘a group of people sharing a common residence and engaging in shared activities of consumption and socialisation’. While families often refer to specific kinship structures, most anthropological definitions and conceptualisations of households similarly include at least three main attributes: families or kin, co-residence, and domestic functions (Bautista et al. 2011; Bender 1967). In fact, as Donald Bender (1971) pointed out, not all members of a household were necessarily kin, and not all who resided in a household (e.g. tenants) automatically become household members. In this sense, the household is not only a physical structure where family members and others may co-reside and where important socialisation of roles, responsibilities, and culture takes place, it is also a unit where labour is organised and repartitioned.

Furthermore, often persons may be part of multiple households. For example, in Yotebieng’s (2017, 2018) research, she found that many refugee families considered themselves to be part of other households, including those of landlords or lovers. Mariane (pseudonym) from Rwanda spoke about how she
considered herself to be part of her lover’s household, as did her lover’s spouse:

When I saw Mariane standing on the side of the street wearing an extravagant evening gown, despite it only being 4 p.m., she ran over to me and gave me a hug. She told me how she hadn’t paid her rent for three months, asking me for money. I asked what happened with her lover, who she explained usually paid her rent and was an essential part of her household, and she told me that his wife is here. His wife had even called her and explained that they were having their own financial challenges so she asked Mariane to refrain from asking him for money for a little while. But it appeared that both Mariane and her lover’s wife accepted that their households were inextricably linked. (Excerpt from Yotebieng’s field notes)

Victor, another Rwandan refugee, explained to Yotebieng (2017, 2018) during her fieldwork a situation that was common across refugee households: the landlord is an essential member who not only provides secure housing, but who traverses the boundaries of the household as a tangential, but unstable, member. Victor explained:

Life of refugees is difficult, well, for everyone I guess. I mean, I don’t have any income, and I am now four months behind in my rent! Even my landlord who we usually consider to be like a father, or a brother, even him, he is starting to get annoyed. I don’t know how much longer he will consider us as part of his household, and just decide to remove us. (direct quote from in-depth interview with Yotebieng)

The question as to whether or not households are centralised or decentralised entities is also being called into question with increasing cross-cultural research. The household is often made up of several smaller units, or hearth-holds (i.e. ‘minimal residential units’ as described by Michel Verdon (1998)), that should be analysed independently to understand how they come together to create the household (Cliggett 2005; Henderson et al. 1997). Proponents of this approach argue that these sub-units within the household are where decisions and management of household responsibilities take place, but that they also exist and operate in relatively autonomous ways (Henderson et al. 1997). Verdon (1998) also suggested that thinking of households of being made up of smaller units necessarily complicates the different conflicting interests and priorities that exist within households. Lisa Cliggett (2005), for example, pointed out that in her research in rural Zambia some households are actually made up of multiple families. Others question whether or not co-residence, or even typologies, are necessary for a household, or if it is an outdated concept in today’s increasingly mobile, yet interconnected, world (Ansell and van Blerk 2004; Haines 2002; Munishi 2016; Nasuti et al. 2015).

When research participants are asked to identify who is in their household, the plasticity of the household for coping purposes becomes readily apparent. Forcone found that participants answered based on the problem that they are confronting, indicating that some family members, such as adult children, do not sleep in the household but that they are members at most mealtimes. Other responses spoke about households that included grandparents and grandchildren, due to familial care-giving, but not the middle generation. Shifting children or ‘putting them out’ (unpublished interview, Nana, 19 September 2017) to external households for single meals or temporary situations is a well-documented response to the burden of feeding multiple children (Gross and Rosenberger 2010). The latter half of the twentieth century saw a rise in ‘blended families’ (Kreider and Ellis 2011). Yotebieng (2017, 2018) also found that expanding the household was seen as a coping strategy to deal with hardship. Jeannette, a Rwandan refugee mother of three young girls, noted: ‘And our girls, when they get married, especially if it is in Europe or the United States, they can help the rest of us! As they start their new home, they will still send support to us’. These households include variations of biological parents, step-parents, step- or half-siblings, and adoptive or foster families. Households fluctuate in size depending upon individual custody arrangements or educational needs, or in response to other challenges.

**Household Change: Moving beyond the Household Development Cycle**

The fluidity and plasticity of households is not a new concept. Netting and colleagues’ (1984) book emphasised that households are not fixed entities across space and time, but dynamic structures that change and adapt depending on changing circumstances, and that they should be studied diachronically (see also Nash 1993; Netting 1979). The changing household over time in a society is referred to as the household development cycle (Nash 1993). However, Netting (1979) considered the household development cycle to be insufficient and often misleading, as it did not pick up on the constantly changing conditions that households were adapting to and as it alluded to, without explicitly mentioning it, the fact that we could not always predict what changes would occur in the external socio-economic environment that may cause a new shift in household composition.
Keith Otterbein’s (1970) diachronic study of changes in Andros households in the Bahamas over time used the concept of the development cycle to try and understand the changes that a household undergoes during its lifespan. This was undertaken through historical methods based on adult life histories, and corroborated with cross-sectional and panel analyses of census data. The panel analyses allowed the ethnographer to access data on a single household across two points in time. Through this research, however, Otterbein (1970) ultimately questioned the utility of exploring the development cycle when the findings suggested that there was no single typical developmental cycle or trajectory for an Andros household, but rather great variation amongst households. Otterbein suggested that as social change and migration increases around the world, including in the Andros area of the Bahamas, perhaps studies of the household structure and development cycle are no longer relevant, and that it is more important to undertake analyses of the social and economic forces that are influencing household formation.

Other studies have attempted to understand how broader social change including rural to urban migration may affect household composition and household development cycles. Remi Clignet and Joyce Sween (1974) studied two different Cameroonian cities to understand how urbanisation affected rates of polygyny and fertility in Africa. They found that, contrary to the demographic transitions observed in other areas of the world, high fertility and plural marriage appeared not to be directly affected by urbanisation alone in Cameroon. Instead, they argued that while the number of wives was still closely correlated with higher numbers of children, the decision to not enter into polygynous marriage or to have fewer children may instead indicate a lack of means to do so, rather than a breakdown of local customs in favour of a nuclear Western-style family. Clignet and Sween’s findings suggest that higher levels of education attainment in urban areas were actually strongly correlated with higher rates of polygyny and a greater number of children. They concluded by noting that an initial decline in family size and plural marriage may only be temporary, and that the association between urbanisation and familial composition and lifestyle changes may be more ‘curvilinear than linear’, and needs to take cultural considerations into account rather than purely economic ones (Clignet and Sween 1974: 239).

Bautista’s (2011) research focused on a subdivision in the Territory of Guam made up primarily of migrants from the Federated States of Micronesia, and it found that the production of housing and urban space is a reflection of their social, cultural and gendered ideas, norms and values. Specifically, Bautista employed ethnographic methods to examine how households were spatially situated in comparison with others and how space within a household was used differently; and she analysed how these attributes reflected the broader ideologies of the group. David Haines (2002) used survey data and an examination of historical records to explore how Vietnamese refugees in the United States reproduced their social and cultural values through continuous patterns of family composition. He also explored how these patterns helped to lead to household self-sufficiency in their new context, especially by looking at the roles of different members and the number of household members who pulled income into the household. He used historical data to demonstrate that these patterns were long-rooted cultural patterns that could be observed for many years prior to conflict in the regions of Vietnam where refugees were coming from, and that they were not necessarily influenced by conflict or the socio-economic and acculturative stress that accompanies resettlement in a new country (Haines 2002). Haines’ research underlines the importance of taking a broader, contextual and longitudinal approach to understanding the household as a unit of analysis.

Marianna Pavlovskaya (2004) examined the dramatic effects that changing economic and social practices after the fall of the Soviet Union had on urban households in Moscow. In her research, she demonstrated that, rather than succumbing to the challenging transition to the market economy and increasing inequality, households continued to adapt in creative and sometimes unpredictable ways to meet their needs. She highlighted the importance of understanding how urban households coped with everyday struggles and engaged with multiple economies, especially as most of the world’s population is indeed living in urban areas, a trend that will seemingly only increase. She used mapping techniques and interviews to understand the multiple economies that Muscovite households engaged with and were part of in order to ensure their survival. She argued that these methods allow us to understand and uncover the interconnections between these multiple economies at the household level, ensuring that people remain central to economic studies: something that she laments is often left out of macro-economic studies (Pavlovskaya 2004).

In Yotebieng’s (2017, 2018) work, Anastasie, an elderly Rwandan refugee, talked about how with the
changing times she had to shift between the households of her sons and vary her economic activities to avoid becoming a burden to them:

Anastasie told me she used to drink one beer a day, either at a small bar in the neighbourhood, or hidden in her room, as her son that she was currently living with was Muslim. She had to stop though, as money had become tight and her health didn’t permit her to sell beignets and fruit juice any more. She had recently moved from the small house she had been living in alone to stay with her son in order to save money, and to help her younger son, whose girlfriend was pregnant, and they needed somewhere to stay. Shaking her head, she told me how she had never imagined herself having to live like this, moving from one son’s house to another, feeling increasingly like a burden. She talked to me about her happy days, her wedding, the fact that she was the only woman in her family to have gotten a diploma, and how her household, when it first started, seemed stable and unbreakable. But then the genocide happened, they were forced to flee, and their households continued to evolve, change, and dissolve as they were dispersed across four countries and three continents. (Excerpt from Yotebieng’s field notes)

**Household Coping**

Much of the research on households that is not focused on understanding the unit in and of itself is focused on coping mechanisms, mostly in relation to food security or how to manage different health crises (Adams et al. 1998; Ansell and van Blerk 2004; Corbett 1998). The relevance of this perspective has to do not just with the composition of the household but also with its plasticity – the adaptation of the household to the problem(s). This is reflected in the ways that impoverished urbanites share resources within the home; food is for all the members within the dwelling, but automobile fuel is not. During Forcone’s fieldwork, Syl explained this during an interview about food security on the South Side of Columbus, Ohio: ‘Always hafta have gas money to give’em. And it’s like, with us, we’re living with my cousin and it’s like ok I’m getting food for the house, I shouldn’t hafta pay for no gas if you buying food for the whole house’ (unpublished interview, 10 August 2017). The household or in-group shifts are dependent upon the resources available.

Nicola Ansell and Lorraine van Blerk (2004) suggested that the increased interest in household coping within and outside of anthropology stems from the acknowledgement of the agency, choice and rationality of people and the understanding that an individual’s actions need to be understood within the broader frame of the households and communities to which they belong. While agency at the household level may at first sound counter-intuitive, Cliggett (2005: 35), in the context of her research on households in rural Zambia, suggests that households are ‘dynamic collections of individuals working both together and apart’. In this sense, agency can be observed at the household level (the actions and choices of household members) and households as a whole can be seen to exert agency in their range of choices and coping tactics within the larger political economy. In fact, in most research on coping the household is taken as the unit of analysis, and this has revealed an enormous variation in the types of households across contexts, as well as in the ranges of coping strategies and options available even within similar households (Corbett 1998). Governmental programmes and social service providing agencies’ definitions of the household pivot on units that share food and living quarters (Internal Revenue Service 2018: 9), but the agency of each individual household is determined upon their choice and need in a given context. This notion of household must also include an awareness of social obligation regardless of residency. One of the youth community researchers working with Forcone explained that when he used his research funds for food it had to cover everyone ‘in the house’, meaning everyone who was there at the time of the distribution. He explained that to do otherwise would be ‘dirty’ (unpublished interview, Deontay, 2 September 2017), re-affirming the notion that the household is a fluid concept in the minds of those who inhabit it.

In Yotebieng’s (2017, 2018) fieldwork, she met up with a one Rwandan refugee, Victoire, who explained how she had to change her household structure as a way of coping with the domestic violence that her husband had begun inflicting on her and her children:

We walked for about 15 minutes, through the winding corridors of a busy market, and then next to the railway on the other side of the market. It turns out I was clear on the other side of the part of the neighbourhood where I was supposed to meet her! On our way there, we talked as if we were old friends that hadn’t seen each other in a long time. I explained to her what I was doing, and she immediately understood. I asked her about herself and her household, and she immediately launched into the fact that she was a single mother, as her husband, another Rwandan refugee whom she had met once they were both living in Douala (she had been here for 22 years), had beat her regularly and couldn’t handle an educated woman. She explained that she had been offered a training programme, and that it was really the straw that broke the camel’s back in the sense that her...
husband refused that she participate, even though it could have been another source of income for the family. She told me that was six years ago and that she had gotten so tired of the constant abuse, that she left him with their five children, who were all born in Cameroon, especially after he started beating them too. She told me she didn’t have money to hire a lawyer and have a real divorce though, but she had effectively changed the structure of her household to flee his constant violence. (Excerpt from Yotebieng’s field notes)

Households and Migration

A newer strand of research in anthropological studies of the household focuses on the effects of global migration on the household and how migration is used as a coping strategy to confront various forms of hardship. Bautista’s (2011) ethnographic research on Micronesian households demonstrates how migration affects marriage patterns amongst Micronesian women, with more women leaving their island to marry, something that is considered to parallel men’s migration to urban areas for work. Stephanie Nasuti and colleagues (2015) also explore how rural–urban migration is employed in Amazonian communities of Brasil as a way to diversify income streams into households by effectively combining households or creating stronger links between those involved in rural and urban economies. They note that mixed qualitative and quantitative research designs are best suited for this type of research, as some of the reasons behind and effects of migration and mobility are subtle and may be overlooked or missed in purely statistical studies. Ansell and van Blerk’s (2004) research also demonstrates how the migration of children to households of extended family members is a way of coping with the effects of HIV by reducing the economic burden of dependents within a household or by bringing in new people to assist in chores or support income that the ill household member may no longer be able to produce.

Randall and colleagues (2011) emphasise that, methodologically, household research that takes migration into consideration can be challenging, as one individual may consider themselves part of multiple households. As this becomes more frequent, they suggest that researchers need to consider methods that allow for this double-counting. Furthermore, individuals can be considered part of multiple households simultaneously. Thomas Weisner and colleagues (1997), in a collection of studies exploring the drivers and effects of rural–urban migration in Kenya, suggested that migration is an adaptation that households employ in order to ensure the well-being and futures of their children, as well as to meet their subsistence needs within their local ecological, social, cultural, political and economic realities. They explored both the intra- and inter-household effects of migration throughout this book. They suggested that the increase in rural–urban migration has led to the breakdown of social customs and that traditional ways of providing care and respecting elders as individuals have become more exposed to the individualistic values of urban contexts. This has had a detrimental effect on household members left behind in rural areas.

Madeleine Wong (2000) similarly explored the effects of migration on households, but in this case she explored the households of Ghanaian women who had migrated to Toronto. She suggested that women’s migration and work has become an important foundation for their households in Canada and Ghana, households to which they both continue to belong and contribute. In this way, Wong argued that, in an era of global migration, researchers of the household need to ‘conceptualise households as heterogeneous, fluid, and spatially diverse in terms of the variety of survival strategies used, if researchers are to fully understand women’s roles within households and women’s choices regarding work and mobility’ (2000: 47). Similarly, Yotebieng (2017, 2018) found in her research that many young Rwandan women explicitly sought marriages overseas in order to expand their households in ways that would better support their families. Her research participants nearly all spoke of household members living elsewhere, mostly in Europe and the United States, with a tinge of pride and hope that having that household member anchored ‘elsewhere’ would surely help to change their daily struggles. In other words, researchers need to include trans-migrants in all of the households that they still contribute to, so as not to overlook the mutual dependencies and interconnections between members of households across international borders, especially as, to some households in the origin communities, remittances are an increasingly important source of revenue and sustenance (Wong 2000).

The household is a locus of cultural creation, where beliefs are ‘produced, created, and changed’ (Cohen and Sirkeci 2011: 30). The members may be either affinal or consanguineal kin, but culture shifts and changes as they adapt to crises and social needs. Trans-migration helps increase a household’s resources depending upon their structure and function within a temporal context, such as during the
early childhood raising years or at a mature period of asset acquisition. This migration increases adaptability within the household and within the local community, as it increases social and financial capital (2011: 31–32). Yet, migration can also contract rather than expand the household. Linda for example, a Rwandan refugee from Yotebieng’s (2017, 2018) research in Cameroon, spoke about how, when her brother went to the United States 15 years earlier, he had promised to help her but instead had completely avoided having any contact with her or sending any support to her.

Challenges within the Current Literature

Despite the earlier work in anthropology that argues for the need for conceptual clarity between the household and family, the two still are often conflated and used interchangeably in the literature (Ansell and van Blerk 2004; Bender 1967; Mcllvaine-Newsad et al. 2003). Bender (1967, 1971) initially called for this distinction, as family was equated with kinship, but households were different and could include kinship as well as elements of residence and shared responsibilities. Even the earlier conceptual distinctions that defined a household as necessary co-residence and the execution of domestic functions is perhaps blurred and complicated by the phenomena of increasing global migration and trans-national households (Ansell and van Blerk 2004; Cohen and Sirkeci 2011; Wong 2000). This blurring includes the question of whether migration and drastic changes in the household should necessarily be considered as maladaptive and/or as proof of a household’s inability to cope, rather than the as the employment of new and different coping strategies in a world in flux. If the latter is the case, then researchers need to develop more sophisticated methodological and theoretical frameworks to adequately capture the realities of households in flux (Ansell and van Blerk 2004; Netting 1979; Netting et al. 1984).

Another clear gap in the literature on household coping is a clear explanation of what a household that has ‘coped’ looks like. What are the attributes of a household that copes well? How does this change from context to context? Does the survival of the household simply mean that the household never changes? Or does it mean that it continues to provide support to its members? What if it is providing support to some of its members while leaving others out? The literature has shown that even in previously considered relatively homogeneous communities, there are multiple types of households and not a single developmental trajectory of what a household looks like (Dressler et al. 1985; Otterbein 1970; Randall et al. 2011). Perhaps we as researchers need to go beyond this reality and understand what the different manifestations of a household that is coping well looks like if we are going to try and do more comparative analyses with structures that vary substantially from context to context.

Lastly, related to the diversity in types of households, further research should explore what households’ needs and aspirations look like across contexts. What are the drivers that create a household, and how do they affect its composition? William Dressler and colleagues (1985) evoke Pierre Bourdieu and refer to this as a form of symbolic violence of research, imposing categories on people that do not necessarily fit or casting them all in a negative light when there is indeed much more diversity to their situations than it at first seems. Much current research, frequently conducted with a single unidimensional scale at the population level, loses ‘rich detail’ in aggregation (Coates et al. 2006). Many frameworks inadvertently impose etic categories of well-being on households from externally derived frameworks (Adams et al. 1998). Furthermore, these categories are not set in stone and need to be continuously confirmed, as they can change over time and with changing socio-historical, political and economic conditions; they may also not be the same across all members of a household (Ellis et al. 2013). While there has been a significant body of research examining gendered roles and responsibilities, the social reproduction of gender roles within the household, and the effects of different household structures on women’s and men’s health and well-being, less has been done to understand the different goals and objectives of individuals within a single household and to what extent these are gendered, for example.

Conclusion

It strikes us that the complexity of the household, something that is so commonplace in the research we read and participate in, is often taken for granted. Yet, at no time in history was the household anything other than a constantly changing and adapting structure, despite the language often used across policy and social science literature that alludes to the household as a static and fixed entity. Not only do the questions asked and the ways of looking at the household exhibit widespread variation across the literature, the
methods and definitions of a household vary substantially as well. For this reason, we end this article with several recommendations for those of us doing research on households.

First, researchers need to ask questions explicitly of our research participants about their household compositions. Specifically, we need to try to understand the variation in types of households, as well as in the minimal residential units or hearth-holds that may exist within households (Verdon 1998). Rather than taking for granted that everyone we see within a structure is part of that household and as a way to better understand the relationship between kinship, co-residence, and domestic roles, Yotebieng started her research by working with a group of family members in each household (whomever is present when she visited) to conduct household composition timelines (HHCTs) or conduct similar activities. Heather McIlvaine-Newsad and colleagues (2003) developed the HHCT to better standardise studies of household composition and changes diachronically. This is important, as the household is a dynamic and changing, rather than a static, unit of analysis. These tools can be used during in-depth interviews with household members to understand better different scenarios, or ‘what if’ situations, and how they would affect the household composition, as well as to better understand the reasons why the household changed during different periods. Initial steps like this can shed light on the goals or desirable outcomes of the household (from an emic perspective) that drive decisions to change household composition.

Second, to the extent that it is possible, we should identify a sample that includes the full range of household compositions that we document during the initial scoping process, rather than assume a range of household characteristics. Next, we need to pay particular attention to any power structures that may indicate who makes the decisions within the household and how these decisions affect other members. This includes taking note of different household members’ roles and contributions to the household, and of how changes within the household affect the daily routines of household members and vice versa, particularly in regard to accessing social capital, networks, or other factors that appear to be linked with outcomes of interest. Gender is a critical attribute to take into consideration when doing this.

Forcone ensured a quasi-emic perspective with her participants. Part of her interview process was to ascertain who is in the household in relation to a specific theme by asking questions like, ‘When you fix meals for the household, who does that include?’ Questions like this open the conversation to when individuals are considered part of the household and avoid making assumptions based on the researcher’s etic conception of the household. How do the participants determine inclusion? Responses include statements about the number of individuals followed by the qualifier ‘everybody in this house’ or the explanation that others sleep elsewhere but they ‘crew’ with a different household for food and social purposes (unpublished interview, Shavelle, 5 August 2017). This can cause immediate confusion in analysis, but it adds immense detail about the informal inter-household coping systems that are in effect.

In taking the above methodological steps in first defining, then sampling, and then observing different activities by different members and ensuring that relevant details are documented in our field notes, we can avoid the categorical fallacy of defining our research participants’ households based on our own conception of what a household is. This also allows us to understand, rather than assume, the level of variation in household compositions within the communities, as well as under which conditions they change. Finally, these steps provide conceptual clarity and insight into how decisions are made to leave members behind or to incorporate new members, and to what extent individuals who no longer physically reside in the same space still continue to make decisions for and contribute to the household.

The household is a ubiquitous unit of analysis within and outside of anthropology. It is often the link between individuals in a society and the broader societies and structures that they interact with on a daily basis. Yet, researchers often take the household for granted as something that means the same thing to everyone across contexts and as something that remains fixed across time and space. But, as the world changes around us, we as researchers need to remember to revisit these concepts and structures that have never been fixed or static. Doing so ensures that we are still adequately capturing what it means to be part of a household and integrating these revisions into our research designs. Also, as anthropological perspectives often privilege comparisons across contexts, time and space, we need to make sure that our methods in conceptualising the household are rigorous enough to allow for this comparability. Anthropology can help to shed light on how households have changed over time and what the frameworks that we are using may be overlooking in terms of important emic insights as to what household coping looks like. Ethnographic details collected about lived experiences can illuminate strengths that are inher-
ent in household plasticity. The weakness can then be brought into focus for effective policy support and social change. Importantly, doing this allows us to move from what has historically been a heavy focus on descriptive or purely functional studies of the household towards a more dynamic focus that asks why households change and what the effects of these changes are.

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