DEBATE

Can the 'African household' be presented meaningfully in large-scale surveys?[1]

Marlize Rabe
Department of Sociology
University of South Africa
PO Box 392 UNISA 0003
Pretoria, South Africa
E-mail: rabeme@unisa.ac.za

Introduction

The African continent, as is the case with all other continents, contains a variety of household (or homestead) structures. The focus of this article is on the manner in which researchers give account of such various household structures in specific southern African contexts. Certain researchers argue that households can easily be classified if clear criteria are in place and if the concepts *family* and *household* are not confused.[2] Others argue that African households are too complex to fit into preconceived 'Western' categories. In this regard Budlender (2003: 62) cites a publication by Russell (1993) wherein the complexity of Swazi households/homesteads is stressed in order to illustrate the inadequacies of census categories: 'Russell ... notes that some scholars are doubtful as to either the possibility or usefulness of compacting the diversity of "African experience and structure into one simple paradigm"'. Although acknowledgement of the complexities of African household structures comprises a large section of the present article, I want to concur with Budlender (2003: 62) who states: 'While the point about diversity is true, it is nevertheless important to find some practical way of implementing meaningful surveys, interpreting them, and allowing those interpretations to inform social policy'.

I argue here that there is a tendency to overstate the uniqueness of African households, namely by comparing it with a simplified model of Western households, and that clear-cut differences between so-called African and Western households do not always exist.[3] Since both these conceptions, of Western and African households, have for years existed side by side in South Africa, the country offers useful data with which to test the validity of using preconceived household categories of different types of households. In this article I will first analyse some of the discussions relating to households in South Africa by looking at the assumed divisions between African and Western households. Thereafter I will discuss some of the complexities related to households by focusing on selected qualitative research studies and by highlighting that households are by nature difficult to capture adequately, regardless of a label such as 'African' or 'Western'. It will be shown how these complexities of African households can become distorted and how incomplete (or even incorrect) deductions can follow from current South African census and household survey practices. In the

last section of this article I will attempt to make recommendations for quantitative studies of households that can accommodate the diversity and complexity of South African households – whether labelled 'African' or 'Western' – more adequately.

Brief overview of South African household debates

In South Africa a number of arguments regarding households have been put forward over the last three decades. Below a brief outline of some of these arguments is given.

An indication of the complexity of household structures can be seen in a debate in which Margo Russell (1994) severely criticised a survey on household structures analysed by Anna Steyn. Steyn (1993) analysed quantitative research to ascertain the type of family structures within which South Africans lived during the 1980s. She concluded that certain family structures were more common amongst certain population groups (referring to the white, Indian, coloured and black racial categories in South Africa). According to Susan Ziehl, (2002: 28-30) Russell argued that Steyn's study, amongst other things, did not take the domestic life cycle concept into consideration and was therefore overstating the prevalence of the nuclear type family form. Ziehl (2002) gave a balanced view on this debate by teasing out the different assumptions and conclusions made by the two authors, and by pointing to the importance of a longitudinal approach in understanding the dynamics of households. In my view the Steyn-Russell-debate alludes to an important aspect that is still relevant today, a fact that Russell (1994) mentioned at the end of her article, namely the advantages and disadvantages of qualitative and quantitative research. One of Russell's main criticisms against Steyn is that she did not use the rich social anthropological qualitative literature on black households to explain the quantitative data. This same challenge of using qualitative data to understand (or at least not misunderstand) quantitative data is still relevant today.

Another debate relating to households is the issue of household heads, which both Debbie Budlender (2003) and Susan Ziehl (2001) commented on. Both authors are critical of the concept 'household head' as it is used by Statistics South Africa (StatsSA).[4] Budlender (2003: 52-53) refers specifically to the October Household Surveys conducted by StatsSA from 1994-1999 and the 1996 census. She shows how enumerators often had different conceptualisations of a household head, which is not clearly defined in the enumerator's manual:

> The enumerator is told to let the respondent decide who is the household head. CSS staff argue that, as in the case of 'race', the concept may be fuzzy or 'unscientific', but most respondents will 'know' what one is talking about (Budlender, 2003: 53).

Ziehl (2001), in turn, after the 1996 census recommended that the term 'household head' should be scrapped and that the oldest person should be written down first. However, in the 2001 census the following appears on the census form:

> The head or acting head is the person who is the main decision maker in the household. If people are equally decision makers, take the oldest person.

In the 2005 General Household Survey (GHS)[5] the instruction to the enumerator is:

> Ask who the *head* (or the *acting head*) of the household is...

and later:

If more than one head or acting head, take the oldest.

The problems regarding the term household head thus seems to receive attention, but are far from being resolved. Based on the term household head, various data sets are analysed for a number of purposes, for example it is quite common to find that a table or figure by StatsSA presented according to the race of the household head. Some of the problems with the term are also discussed in detail by O'Laughlin (1998) where she demonstrates practically that so-called female-headed households with migrant income earners in Botswana cannot be distinguished from female-headed households without migrant income earners – an argument that is also relevant to South Africa. The term household head is rather useless in this context and the fact that absent migrant household members are not included in standard household questionnaires is problematic in at least the southern African context. The issue of absent household members in different contexts is discussed further below.

In the 1990s other lines of enquiry related to households focused on the domestic fluidity of especially black South African households – including so-called 'coloureds' or South Africans from 'mixed descent' (see Seekings, 2003: 1; Spiegel, 1996; Spiegel et al., 1996). 'Inter-household networks of mutual assistance' (Beittel, 1992: 221) have also been touched upon. In 2003, a South African-based journal, *Social Dynamics*, published an issue on households where other issues such as unpaid domestic work done by young female relatives and the concept 'household head' was also scrutinised (Seekings, 2003).

In this 2003 journal Russell (2003: 12; 13; 23) stated repeatedly that the 'conjugal system' is central to 'white' South Africans and kinship is central to 'black' South Africans. Russell thus argues that the conjugal couple is not central to 'black' South African family lives and that there are clear-cut differences between 'black' and 'white' South African households. Although there are certainly different household practices based on different heritages, I want to argue here against overstating such differences to the extent that alternative practices are not recognised.

Historical experiences in South Africa impacted heavily on household structures in that a migrant system was enforced on black people by the apartheid regime. In practice this meant that many waged workers lived in urban centres near their places of work while their families were legally required to stay in rural areas or the so-called homelands. An oscillating migrant system developed in which waged workers lived in urban centres for the greater part of the year and only returned to their families for short breaks. It is important to note that migrant household members are neither unique to blacks living in apartheid South Africa, nor was it necessarily always imposed on families (see Adepoju, 2006: 27ff; Manchuelle, 1997: 2; Rabe, 2006: 26ff and Wilson, 1972: 120-143). However, the migrant system in South Africa was vigorously and increasingly enforced upon huge numbers of black South Africans from the late nineteenth until the late twentieth century. Such a prolonged imposed system put enormous pressure on households, which would seemingly undermine the very idea of a conjugal couple, as partners are often separated residentially for the greater part of the year. The apartheid system thus contributed greatly to different experiences for white and black South African households because black households had to endure various restrictions in their living and working conditions.

Apart from these created divisions between black and white South African households, diverse cultural practices are also found, which are sometimes narrowly ascribed to racial differences only. In this context Russell argued that an author had seriously erred in conducting a qualitative study on commuter couples in South Africa without paying attention to race:

> One legacy of the *apartheid* project is a reluctance to acknowledge cultural differences between different racial groups. The fashionable emphasis is on what people share, and how unequally shares are distributed. All-too-often, this impedes understanding of social phenomena. Take for example, one study of marital separation. The sample of twelve couples who live apart presumably contains black and white people, but it requires some detective work on the part of the reader to establish this, for race is the one factor never mentioned. Although the author tells us that 'the respondents have different first languages' (Rabe, 2001: 279), she makes the surely ill-judged assumption that culture or race are irrelevant in a study of the conjugal couple (Russell, 2003: 9).

Russell (2003: 8) argues that:

> Black and white South Africans are brought up with two radically different kinship idioms. One is derived from the conjugal system which has predominated in north-western Europe for at least five hundred years; the other is the consanguinal descent system characteristic of most of Africa.

I would argue that that Russell's insistence on linking the conjugal system to white South Africans' households and kinship to black South Africans[6] is misleading in its oversimplification, as neither Western nor African culture is that one-dimensional. Many Africans (from different racial categories) construct their households with varying, and sometimes conflicting, values in mind. Socioeconomic aspects, such as migrancy, work opportunities and (lack of) infrastructure, can also affect the current household structure, as a longitudinal approach to household structures, as suggested by Ziehl (2002), could uncover.

Russell's insistence on the overriding importance of the consanguine system amongst black Africans blinds us to the importance that the conjugal system has for some black Africans. The conjugal system is in fact of great importance in certain African contexts as illustrated by Robertson (1984: 182) when describing that in Central Accra, Ghana, '[c]onjugal relations are intimately entwined with economic reality'. However, in these relationships the wives are required to be submissive towards their husbands and the nature of the relationship between the couple is one of 'mutual respect' rather than 'romantic love'. The importance of the couple's relationship seems to be restricted to economic aspects which is also observed in the so-called 'vat-en-sit marriages' in South African urban areas. These latter relationships are characterised by couples who share households without honouring the customary rites of marriages (such as wedding ceremonies or the exchange of *lobola*/bridewealth). These 'vat-en-sit marriages' entail an underlying survival strategy where the couple's resources are pooled (Beittel, 1992: 209-210). In these two examples of black African contexts the conjugal couple is thus recognised as increasing the economic survival chances of the individual by giving access to more resources and resource people.

However, the conjugal couple is more commonly defined by its emotional bonds than by the economic advantages the conjugal bond may hold for partners. In this

regard Colin Murray's (1981) extensive anthropological study in Lesotho, which was (and still is) a major sending area of migrant workers to South Africa, is of importance.[7] Murray (1981: 103) comments on the implicit assumption that Africans do not have close ties between spouses/partners:

> Thus there is some substance to criticism of kinship analyses based on the imposition of western categories such as that of the nuclear family. But such criticism is quite gratuitous if it leads the critic either to insist by contrast but without appropriate evidence on the importance of the 'extended family', or to undermine the credibility of evidence – now surely overwhelming – that the enforced separation of spouses generates acute anxiety, insecurity and conflict. The latter tendency implies an alternative, distinctively African view of marriage and the family which does not presuppose intimacy between husband and wife and which is not therefore undermined by the separation of spouses.

Russell's argument that the conjugal couple is not of similar importance to black Africans compared to whites had in fact been used to justify the enforced separation of couples through the migrant system. Murray's argument here is thus in reaction to such misconstructions of 'African traditions'. The conjugal couple should therefore not be so easily dismissed as unimportant for black Africans. In Rabe's (2001) study on professional couples who are residentially divided due to different work opportunities, no difference was found in the expressed emotional attachment of interviewees from different racial categories. In this study, however, people were represented as lonely, as struggling to cope without partners and people who would prefer to live with their partners. Russell's insistence on the historical importance of the kinship system in Africa has little value to a *black* woman living alone (away from all other extended family members) in Mamelodi with her children and struggling with public transport because her *black* husband needs their only car during the week in a different town. Race was not discussed in that study because the aim was to look at the coping mechanisms of professional people when their job opportunities divide them residentially from their partners. All the couples had lived in neo-local households before the separation (with the exception of one couple who had had relationship problems which ended in the killing of the wife by the husband, who then committed suicide) and no differences were found between people from different racial categories.[8] One cannot use decades of anthropological studies from different contexts (see Russell, 2003: 14ff) to tell a researcher that the highly educated urbanised neo-local black/white/coloured households in her study do not consider the conjugal couple as important.[9] To summarise – research has to be evaluated within its context.

In the Ghanaian example, in 'vat-en-sit marriages', amongst migrant couples from Lesotho and amongst professional urbanised blacks, the economic and/or emotional ties between couples are thus of importance. In fact, Russell's (2003b: 153-176) own research indicates that there are differences regarding verbal statements on Western conjugal systems between urban and rural blacks. Note that the second article by Russell (2003b) in this *Social Dynamics* issue can in itself be regarded as contradicting the argument that black and white South Africans have vastly different experiences of family life, since especially young black urban South Africans have different views regarding historical practices. Russell's argument that the conjugal couple is not central to black South African family lives and that clear-cut differences exist between

black and white South African households, can therefore not be cast in stone, although it should be put in context.

'Western' households

The idea of the dominance of the nuclear family as a result of industrialisation was particularly promoted by Goode in 1982 (Ziehl, 2001: 36) and Goode maintains this basic premise in a recent publication (see Goode, 2003). The simplicity of such a 'Western conjugal system' could seem alluring comparative material when one wants to show the complexity amongst African families and households.[10] However, just as there is not 'an African family', or 'an African household', there is also not 'a Western family' or 'a Western household'. Demographic and historical research in the USA and in various parts of Europe shows the complexity of family structures over time (see Cooper, 1999: 13-37; Kertzer, 1991: 155-179; Teachman et al., 1999: 39-76), and 'Western conjugal system' cannot be an appropriate term to capture the diversity found amongst various European and North American countries.

When looking at so-called Western households, the complexity of households is well documented, but at times not well interpreted. Russell is for example aware of Laslett's earlier work on nuclear family households in Europe (compare Russell, 2003a: 42; 1993: 783) and it is important to note that she traces 'Western social practice' (2003a: 5; 8; 11) mainly back to Laslett's work in England (Russell, 2003a: 13); she sometimes refers to such households as 'northern European' (2003a: 6) or 'north-western European' (2003a: 14). However, Kertzer (1991: 159ff) shows a much more complex picture regarding family and household structures in Europe by alerting us to the development in Laslett's work over time. Laslett had developed his arguments regarding the universality (or not) of the nuclear family household over time by identifying different practices in different regions in Europe (cf. Laslett, 1972; 1983: 516ff). Laslett was involved in various debates and was sensitive to conflicting views on the dominance of the nuclear household and was convinced of the historical centrality of the nuclear family only in England – not the *West*. Kertzer (1991) furthers these arguments regarding the complexity of households by analysing evidence from various studies and from different contexts.

Similarly, white South African households cannot uncritically be equated with so-called Western practices. Russell (2003a: 13) herself distinguishes between different European influences on white South Africans, which therefore undermines the concept of *a* Western household. Although these historically (north-western) European household practices have a bearing on white South African households in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries, another history also developed in South Africa. In this history, European immigrants from different countries arrived in South Africa at different times, they married and shared households with people from different European or other countries and people from various other cultures. White South African households developed their own practices which have some similarities with certain European households and some differences. For example: interracial households in South Africa were restricted due to apartheid policies, but black domestic workers often shared households with white employers. Furthermore, despite the enduring taboos and restrictions on interracial marriages and other sexual liaisons, millions of South Africans have mixed descent systems.

When we thus want to research different households in South Africa, we should acknowledge the diversity found amongst black African households, white households as well as all other racial groupings found in South Africa. I would like to put forward a premise that will guide the rest of this discussion: Regardless of the racial category of individuals, households are difficult to capture adequately in surveys or census data. The heterogeneous population of South Africa with its diverse cultural roots together with the long history of an enforced migrant system contributes to this difficulty.

Household research in South Africa

Prior to 1996 South Africa had had a troubled statistical history, since the apartheid policies of the time heavily influenced the gathering of data (cf. Bah, 1999). For example, the people residing in the former 'homelands' (Transkei, Bophuthatswana, Venda and Ciskei) were excluded from censuses, as the apartheid regime did not consider these areas as part of South Africa. In 1996 the first census which covered the entire South Africa was held. One of the key aims of the 1996 census was thus to determine how many people actually lived in South Africa. Ziehl (2001) states, in addition, that the South African government wanted to establish the population distribution and determine the socioeconomic status of its citizens in order to evaluate the impact of the government's policies. She further argues that the issue of household structures did not enjoy a prime position. Ziehl made a number of recommendations for future household surveys towards the end of her article (see for example comments on household head above), but the article was published in 2001, the year in which the next census took place.

From 2002 onwards, annual General Household Surveys (GHS) were conducted by StatsSA, which replaced the former October Household Surveys:

> Statistics SA conducted the GHS annually from 2002 since a need was identified for a regular survey designed specifically to measure the level of development and the performance of government programmes and projects. The GHS was thus developed for this purpose. The indicators measured in the 13 nodal areas identified for the Integrated Rural Development Strategy (IRSD) formed the subject matter for the survey. (Statistics South Africa 2006: I).

StatsSA has announced that in future, a census will take place every ten years in South Africa (the next census is thus planned for 2011). A 'Community Survey' was conducted in 2007, which is described as an extended household survey. According to the head of StatsSA, the questionnaire for this survey was developed after wide consultation with various stakeholders (StatsSA, 2006). The questionnaire used in this survey reveals that the definition of household head (see above) and the de facto system of including household members (see below) is continued (StatsSA, 2007).

I will mainly focus on the 2005 General Household Survey here but I will also refer to the questionnaire used in the 2001 census in South Africa.

Household de jure versus household de facto

In referring to the migrant system, Spiegel et al., (1996: 11-12) coined the term 'stretched household' to explain some of the dynamics associated with such households. The term indicates that all the members of a stretched household do not share their daily meals or live together, but they are all committed to contribute to the

household in one way or another. Of the four criteria traditionally associated with households, namely: 'co-residence, productive co-operation, income sharing and commensality', only 'shared income and its expenditure' is applicable in 'the southern African context of labour migrancy' in such a stretched household. The members of a 'stretched' household may thus not live and eat together on a daily basis, but they have a commitment to contribute to that household on an ongoing basis.

This 'stretched household' term of Spiegel et al., (1996) is, however, not unique. Bustamante (2005) uses Glenn's term 'split-household', which describes Mexican breadwinners working in the USA while sending money to their families living in Mexico. In more general terms, Wallerstein & Smith's (1992: 13) analysis of households in relation to the world economy states that '[A] household is [not] necessarily a group resident in the same house, or even in the same locality, although ... this is often the case. Households are defined as those who have de facto entered into long-term income pooling arrangements'.

Thus we can conclude that not all household members, including couples, always share a residence, and that this phenomenon is not unique to 'black South Africans'. In this regard, the terms household de facto and household de jure are commonly used, with the former referring to households where all members live together on a daily basis and the latter to households which have absent household members for certain periods. The distinction of present and absent household members is particularly stressed in debates regarding 'household head' (see for example Budlender, 2003; Murray, 1981: 47-56; O'Laughlin, 1998: 6). The earlier entrenched migrant system of southern Africa certainly contributed to the importance of these distinctions, but it applies by no means to southern Africa in particular or even to Africa. The Canadian Census 2001[11] (Canadian Statistics, 2001), for example, was based on de jure households, as the instruction to enumerators was to regard the following people as part of the household.

Absent household members are a reality in different parts of the world. As stated before, there is a danger in problematising African families and African households by comparing them with a simplified 'Western category', or in the case of South Africa, with 'white South Africans'. Beittel (1992: 199-200), for example, chronicled how few white immigrants lived with their families in the Rand (referring to the Witwatersrand with Johannesburg as focal point) in the mid-1890s; historically, these family households too could be adequately described as stretched households.

According to the 2005 General Household Survey (as well as the mentioned 2007 Community Survey), members have to stay for at least four nights of the week in the household to be considered a household member. On the questionnaire (StatsSA, 2006), the following is stated:

> B Has …… stayed here (in this household) for at least four nights on average per week during the last four weeks?
> 1 = YES
> 2 = NO. *End of questions for this person.*

Yet under the 'Summary of the key findings' of this same questionnaire, the following is reported: 'Persons outside the household are important sources of financial support to household members that were not employed' (Statistics South Africa, 2006: iv). It is difficult to understand how such a conclusion can be drawn from the GHS

questionnaire if no questions are asked about persons not residing in the household. I strongly want to recommend for future surveys the inclusion of absent members into the household. The following examples of household structures obtained from two qualitative studies will further illustrate this point.

Sample household structures

In my doctoral study on fatherhood (Rabe, 2006), thirty in-depth interviews (and a further ten follow-up interviews) with men working at a goldmine south-west of Johannesburg were conducted in 2002 and 2003. At the outset of these interviews, a semi-structured interview schedule which contained the question 'How many children do you have?', was used. I noted the answers to this question, but then I continued with probing questions to form a fuller picture of the interviewee's household structure(s), the number of biological children, the number of children he supports financially, the number of children he lives with, his relationships with female partners, etc. The aim of my research was to gain insight in the relationships between fathers and their children, but it was striking how the initial answer to 'how many children do you have?' and the eventual complex relationships men have with any number of children indicate how differently the interviewees interpreted the initial question. The following three men all answered initially that they had three children, but their relationships with their children and their households structures were as follows:

Example 1: Lucky is a Zulu man in his early fifties whose wife passed away shortly before my first encounter with him (she died of natural causes related to high blood pressure and diabetes). After a short spell as an underground mineworker, Lucky worked in the human resource office where his daily job entailed collating statistics. Although he told me he had three children initially, he had had five biological children with his wife. I obtained the latter information when I asked about the ages of his children and he answered: '... in fact my children are five, they are not three. I am just mentioning these ones because the others are staying in Durban, that is where I am coming from'. He was also the biological father of a sixth child younger than his other five children. This sixth child was born from an extramarital affair. He had no contact with this child and he believed the child's mother was remarried – he did not consider this child his responsibility. His wife used to be a teacher. She worked in Kwa-Zulu Natal and lived there with their only daughter and their youngest son. At the time of the interview the daughter was working in Kwa-Zulu Natal and the youngest son was studying at the University of Cape Town. His eldest son, a policeman, was married and lived with his wife and children in a separate residence nearby, and the third son, a clerk, lived with his girlfriend, also in the vicinity. They had weekly family gatherings where the children and grandchildren visited him (he mentioned that his children were very diligent in their visits as they believe he was lonely after his wife's death). His second son, a male nurse, married during the time of my interviews (I saw Lucky on a regular basis) and after they paid *lobola* of R21000, this daughter-in-law, a medical doctor, had moved in with him and his son.

His first answer of having three children is probably related to his memory of raising his three sons mostly by himself, while his daughter and youngest son were

raised by their mother. He speaks fondly of his late wife, although we changed the subject when he became misty eyed.

If we imagine Lucky's answers to different questionnaires, we find the following:

– How many children do you have? Three.
– How many children have you fathered? Six.
– How many children live with you in your house? One.
– How many children are you supporting financially? One (his student son) or perhaps he might answer two and thereby include the son living with him, since Lucky had contributed to the *lobola*.

On the 2005 General Household Survey, Lucky would have been shown to live with one son and daughter-in-law. Three income earners would be recorded for this household. His six biological children would also be noted, but we would not know that he supports his student son than it is not living with him.

Example 2: When I asked Stuart if he had any children, he answered: 'Yes, three.' He is the biological father of three children and all three children have different biological mothers. His eldest, a boy, he had had with his girlfriend with whom he shares a dwelling. However, their son, who is deaf, attended a school in Port Elizabeth for children with special needs and they therefore saw him only twice a year. Stuart and his girlfriend hailed from Port Elizabeth and his grandmother still lived there. Stuart's father had passed away, but he saw his mother daily even though she lived in a separate household with his sister. His other two biological children also resided in Port Elizabeth with their maternal grandmothers. The biological mothers were employed in Port Elizabeth and Cape Town respectively. Since both these biological mothers were employed, Stuart believed the children were taken care of. He did send money to these two children, though, and he also saw them on his annual visit to Port Elizabeth. His girlfriend was, however, very unhappy about any contact he had with these women or their children.

If we imagine Stuart's answers to the mentioned questionnaires, we find the following:

– How many children do you have? Three.
– How many children have you fathered? Three.
– How many children live with you in your house? None.
– How many children are you supporting financially? Three (although he is fully supporting only one child and making contributions to two others).

In the 2005 General Household Survey, Stuart and his girlfriend would have been shown to be a male-headed household with no children living with them. Stuart's three biological children and his girlfriend's one biological child would be recorded. We would not be able to know whether they are the biological parents of the same child, since their son was not living with them, and therefore none of his information is recorded on this questionnaire. We would also be unaware that some of the income of this household is spent outside the household to support children.

Example 3: Tony is separated from his first wife, with whom he had no children. He now has a common-law wife, Lucy, whom he plans to marry in future (he had had a

civil marriage with his first wife). Tony and his partner lived with Tony's parents during our first interview. Tony's brother, the brother's wife and children as well as other relatives also lived in the same household. After government subsidised housing developments in the area, Tony and Lucy managed to secure their own house by the time we had our second interview. The house is registered in Lucy's name, who is unemployed and legally not married. Tony encouraged Lucy to apply for the house since he does not qualify for such a subsidised house, as he is employed.

Tony also told me he has three children. Tony and his partner are the biological parents of one daughter. This young child was resident with them. Tony's partner has two other biological children with two different men. The younger of the two had started school shortly before our second interview. This child lived with Tony's parents during the week, since their home was close to her school, and she lived with Tony and his partner during weekends. Over the weekend Lucy helped her daughter with her washing for the week and Tony helped her with her school work (both Tony and Lucy had completed Grade 12). This child would probably live with Tony and his partner throughout the week when she was older, but Tony felt she was too small to manage the public transport on her own. Lucy's eldest biological daughter lived with relatives of her biological father, who had initiated this arrangement, and he insisted on supporting her financially. When I was still trying to understand the relationships, Tony said to me:

They are my children, I treat them as my own children because if you start saying this one is not my children, it is going to hurt their mother. She will say, *ai*, you are not treating my child as your children. You see?

Tony's parents (and other family members) shared a meal at Tony at Lucy's house over the weekends. Tony also made contributions to his parents' household – mainly by buying bags of maize meal when requested. Both Tony's parents were employed, and they paid the school fees of Tony's brother's children.

Tony's parents lived with the mentioned Grade 1 girl, Tony's only brother's school-going children, and Tony's two cousins, of which one is a police reservist and the other a taxi driver. Tony's unemployed brother and his wife moved out of the household to a government subsidised house at more or less the same time as Tony and his common-law wife did the same. This brother and his wife lived from a little money Tony's brother had saved before he resigned from his job at the same mine where Tony worked (the reason for his brother's resignation is of a personal nature).

If we imagine Tony's answers to the different questionnaires, we find the following:

– How many many children do you have? Three.
– How many children have you fathered? One.
– How many children live with you in your house? Two (during the first interview); One (during the second interview).
– How many children are you supporting financially? Two.

If the 2005 General Household Survey was conducted during the time of my second interview with Tony, three unconnected households would have been recorded. In the case of Tony and Lucy, a male-headed household would have been recorded, since Tony would have been regarded as the main decision maker in the house. Tony would have been the partner and they would be recorded as having one dependant child in the

household. Lucy would have been recorded as the mother of three children and Tony as the father of one. Tony's wages would have been recorded as their source of income.

Tony's parents' household would have his father as the household head, living with Tony's mother as the wife, and three dependant grandchildren together with two other family members of whom one (the taxi driver) is earning money. It would have been established that the three grandchildren have living biological parents that are not part of the household. The fact that Lucy's middle biological child lives with Tony and Lucy for three nights of the week would be unrecorded, and we would also not know of the financial assistance from Tony towards this child and to his parents' household.

Tony's brother's household would have been recorded as a male-headed household with no dependants and no income except for a bit of interest from savings.

Example 4: All the men I had interviewed for my doctoral research are labelled black, and it may therefore be wrongly deduced that only 'black households' are problematic when trying to fit them into so-called Westernised categories. The following example is, however, one of the white respondents in the commuter couple study (Rabe, 2001) that Russell (2003) found so problematic as mentioned above.

Jimmy was a naval officer and therefore, throughout his career, had spent time away from his wife, namely when he was at sea, on compulsory courses and engaged in other work-related activities. These activities often took him away from home for weeks at a time. At the time of my interview with him in 1999, he had for the preceding five months been living in the Navy headquarters in Pretoria. His wife was a successful businesswoman and she lived with her mother in Cape Town. Jimmy went home once a month for a weekend, and there was no clear indication when he would return more permanently to Cape Town. In the General Household Survey, the household in Cape Town would have been registered as a female-headed household consisting of a daughter and mother. The relationship between Jimmy and this household would be unrecorded.

Discussion

We could continue with countless examples of various household structures which would not be well reflected in various surveys. The issue I wanted to illustrate with these examples are the following: When conducting a household survey it is important to collate basic information on absent household members, especially if they contribute financially to that household. We cannot begin to understand households appropriately if such basic information is not included. Apart from having a clear understanding of the contributions made by absent household members, we also have to know whether the household income is used to help sustain absent household members or other households. Dependant children often do not live with their parents, in order to be close to educational institutions. In some such cases the parents pay all educational expenses and/or other expenses, but in other cases they do not. In certain cases, children help to carry household expenses of parents, or parents those of children (or those of any other household with or without relatives), even though they do not live in the same dwellings or in dwellings in close proximity. A number of household varieties exist in South African society, and the legacy of migrancy certainly contributed to this variety. If we aim to understand the complex dynamics of

households, it is paramount that questions with reference to household members who contribute to or use resources from a particular household be added in censuses and large-scale surveys.

Conclusion and recommendations

The diversity of black African households and families is an undeniable fact. Similarly, so-called Western households and families are also characterised by variety. In fact when a social researcher embarks on *any* study related to families and/or households, the complexity of these systems is a challenging aspect of the study.

When conducting large-scale surveys and censuses which focus on household structures, further complexities emerge. Without becoming unwieldy,[12] such surveys and censuses must be able to accommodate the complexities of households. For example, if we want to begin to understand household dynamics, we should at least know of absent household members who contribute to the household's income or who use some of the household's income in another household. StatsSA's approach of looking only at the de facto household is therefore misleading, (particularly when household surveys are undertaken and not censuses) and can lead to distorted deductions. Similarly, the insistence on identifying a household head does not explain much about households. It would be of far greater value to understand the relations between the household members and to identify all the income earners regardless of whether they reside inside or outside the particular dwelling. Surveys and censuses have many users and it is therefore of the utmost importance that the data do not mislead users into false interpretations.

Notes

1. This article was first presented at the International Sociological Association Congress in 2006 in Durban, with the title: Is the 'African household' a myth?

2. An argument presented by the Swede Jan Trost when this article was presented as a paper at the 2006 ISA Congress.

3. The similarities and differences in the understanding of different household structures in different parts of Africa, India, Latin-America and other developing countries is a challenging avenue for research but it will not be included here.

4. Formerly known as South Africa's Central Statistical Service (CSS).

5. The GHS replaced the October household surveys.

6. I use the crude distinction between white and black South Africans here in the way Russell presented her arguments.

7. Russell (2003: 30) refers to his study when she cites Murray's phrase of 'divided families'.

8. In addition, certain of the people in the study (Rabe, 2001) could not fit into the usual South Africa racial categories due to interracial marriages and different nationalities. The interviewees were selected because they followed professional careers and they were separated from their partners due to work commitments.

9. I cannot agree with Russell (2003: 9) that a single study which does not mention race is indicative of a general trend of 'a reluctance to acknowledge cultural difference between different racial groups'.

10. See for example how Swazi homesteads are misrepresented because the role of indigenous enumerators is undervalued (Russell & Mugyenyi, 1997).

11. I could not obtain a copy of the 2006 version.

12. Surveys or censuses should not become too cumbersome for enumerators or too difficult to interpret by various people and organisations who want to use the results of such surveys and censuses.

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