

The 'Facticity' of Households and its Significance

Prof. dr Anke Niehof

Farewell address upon retiring as Full Professor of
Sociology of Consumers and Households at Wageningen University
on 18 April 2013



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(De feitelijkheid van huishoudens en wat dat betekent)

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Mr Rector Magnificus, colleagues, family, friends, ladies and gentlemen,

The word 'facticity' (Dutch: *feitelijkheid*) in the title of my lecture was taken from the following statement by the sociologist Naila Kabeer (1994: 114):

The empirical significance of household relationships in the daily management of resource entitlements, and as the routine context of people's lives, suggests that it has a certain facticity, despite its shifting guises.

The word 'facticity' cannot be found in the dictionaries that I consulted and is not recognized as proper English by the spelling and grammar checker on the computer. However, I propose we keep it. In my view, it summarizes perfectly the character of a phenomenon the existence of which can be inferred from empirical data on real-life processes. It stands for something, even though this something is mostly taken for granted and rarely defined as a research problem. When in August 1993, I was appointed to the Chair of Sociology of the Household, it was my task to problematize the household, this 'arena of everyday life' which most people take for granted and even in scientific articles scholars often do not bother to define (Casimir and Tobi 2011). Today, I would like to reflect with you on the significance of households that is implied by their facticity. I shall place this reflection first in a historical and then in a contemporary and comparative perspective.

In 1952, Professor Visser became the first professor in Wageningen and in the Netherlands to occupy the chair of what was then called "household sciences", and she was also the first female professor in Wageningen. Wageningen followed the trend in the United States where since the Lake Placid Conferences of 1899-1909 Home Economics had become part of the curricula and was established as a separate field of study at American universities (Richards 2000). Home economics had the household and the domestic domain as its objects of study and had an emancipatory agenda. Like household sciences in Wageningen, it was to lay the scientific

foundation for enhancing the quality of domestic production and the emancipation of women as knowledgeable and responsible housewives, to be the equals of their educated husbands. I know that to our present-day ears, of feminists and non-feminists alike, this does not sound emancipatory at all. But at that time, the second feminist wave was yet to come.

One has to realize that in Europe after World War II, people were very much under the spell of modernity. In the wake of Darwin's biological evolutionist paradigm, social evolutionism preached the blessings *and* the unavoidability of modernisation. Dutch agriculture was modernized, farms grew in scale, and new technologies and principles of land consolidation [*ruilverkaveling*] were applied. Women had to take this into their stride as well. They not only had to be modern managers of their households, they also had to "help" manage a modern farm. The word "help" should be put between quotation marks because these women were in most cases also farmers, even though formally they were just farmer wives (Whatmore 1990). For the Netherlands, the gendered nature of the "farm family business" (Gasson and Errington 1993) was described in the Wageningen PhD theses of Bock (2002) and Van der Burg (2002). Given the integration of household and farm, it is logical that the European version of Home Economics as a discipline became attached to an agricultural university, not only here but also, for example, in the UK at Reading, and in Germany at Hohenheim. The chair that I had the privilege to occupy for almost 20 years is unique in the Netherlands, and fortunately there will be a successor to whom I can hand it over.

However, the present chair is quite different from that of the first incumbent, Professor Visser (1952-1977). The value attached to the agricultural sector declined, and so did the attention for the farm household. In the 1960s, the second feminist wave symbolized the growing urge for women to get out of their houses and function in society and the labour market, and the term household acquired connotations of traditionality and anti-emancipatory containment. But, at the same time, feminist economists did their best to make the unpaid economy of housework visible by trying to calculate its economic value (Razavi 2007), thereby at least testifying to the facticity of housework. The economist Gary Becker (1991) developed an alternative approach to the household that he called the New Home Economics. However, his "neoclassical tools" (Razavi 2007: 4) compelled him to use notions like the 'altruistic household head' and the 'joint utility of the household' that were soon contested (Kabeer 1991, 1994). In a by now classic article, Amartya Sen (1990: 129) acknowledged the household's internal tensions and summarized the key issue as follows, and I quote:

The members of a household face two different problems simultaneously, one involving cooperation (adding to total availabilities) and the other conflict [...] Social arrangements regarding who does what, who gets to consume what, and who takes what decision can be seen as responses to this combined problem of cooperation and conflict.

This view on the household emphasizes the need for bargaining among household members (Agarwal 1997). My former Wageningen colleague Kees de Hoog who died far too early, referred to it as the bargaining household [Dutch: *onderhandelings-huishouden*] (cf. De Hoog and Van Ophem 2006).

Simultaneously, urbanisation, increased prosperity in the Netherlands and elsewhere in the 'Western' world, and modern media, accelerated the trend of the encroachment of consumer society on daily life. The emergence of a consumer society in the so-called 'developed' parts of the world, entailed a divide between production and consumption as separate spheres, and an increasing abundance (and redundancy) of goods. An individual's identity became more contingent upon lifestyle and consumption than upon work and occupation (Smart 2010). In a consumer society we "are accustomed to being addressed as consumers", says Sassatelli (2007: 2). These changes resulted in a similar shift of framing households as sites of consumption rather than production, and addressing women as "homemakers". These developments are reflected in the fact that in 2001 my chair of 'Sociology of the Household' was renamed 'Sociology of Consumers and Households', and now changed into 'Sociology of Consumption and Households'.

One noteworthy implication of the hegemony of consumption is the fact that large groups of the world's population who lack the resources to attain high consumption standards, "have found themselves marginalized within, or excluded from, a burgeoning consumer culture" (Smart 2010: 137). In the case of the less privileged, the conceptualisation of the household as primarily a site of consumption, leads to the underexposure and undervaluation of household production, and of people's agency in contributing to that. To a certain extent this is compensated for by the scholarly attention for livelihood analysis that is now broadly applied to low-resource households in poor countries. Here, livelihood systems, portfolios, and strategies are anchored to households (cf. Niehof 2004a). The following figure summarizes this dual position of the household.

Bridging the Divide

the (study of) the household in different contexts

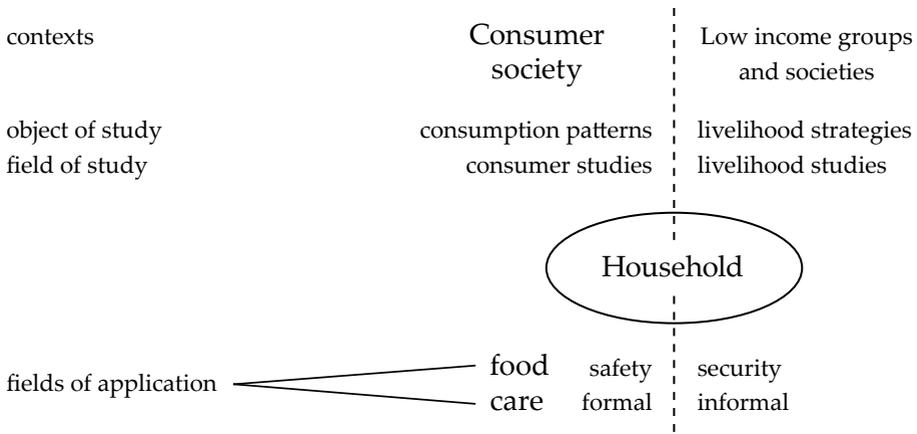


Figure 1 The (study of the) household between production and consumption

In the figure, the left-hand side pictures the household in the context of consumer societies, as a site of consumption. The scientific study of consumption applied to the fields of food and care emphasizes nutrition and food safety and formal rather than informal care. Additionally, users of formal care are seen as customers rather than patients (cf. Mol 2008). The right-hand side of the picture positions the household as the locus where livelihood is generated, and emphasizes the agency of households in attaining food security and providing informal care.

Do we indeed have a situation as pictured in Figure 1? Do households function differently in the one paradigm as compared to the other, and should there be two types of sociological approach to the household? Are those the “shifting guises” in Kabeer’s quotation? The answer to the last question is definitely “no”. The shifting guises are the different forms households assume in different socio-cultural settings, at different times in history, and in response to demographic developments.

Regarding the first two questions, at first glance the answer would be “yes”. The figure does seem to capture an existing reality, including the corresponding duality in sociological approaches. When I started my studies in Leiden in 1966, there was “western” sociology and “non-western” sociology (the latter being closer to anthropology). In Wageningen the lingering division – at least in name – between “rural” sociology and “development” sociology, to a certain extent, addresses the different sides of the figure. So, where does that leave the household?

In this lecture I intend to argue that the concept of household bridges the divide and that this can be demonstrated by investigating the facticity of the household in both contexts. I shall do so, also using the results of research carried out by myself and the staff and PhDs of the chair group during the past ten years. More specifically, I shall investigate this for the fields of application of food and care.

Food and the facticity of households: A comparative perspective

Households can be described as family-based, co-residential units that jointly manage resources to provide for the primary needs of their members (cf. Rudie 1995: 228). In spite of all disclaimers about their internal inequalities, contested household membership and headship, and cases of people not living under one roof but eating together or vice versa, providing for their members' primary needs remains the core business of households. Food is a basic, primary need. The adult members of a household will use their capabilities to ensure adequate food provision for themselves and their dependants. How do they do that and what if they fail?

Food banks

Since 2002, food banks have been set up in the Netherlands, and their number is growing. I shall share with you some of the findings in the master thesis of Wilma Bol (2010). The supervisor was Hilje van der Horst, who continues to do research on this topic. Wilma Bol did her research here in Wageningen at the *Voedselbank Steunpunt Neder-Veluwe en Omstreken* (VSNV).

In 2009, 190 households used the VSNV. One-person households made up almost 50 percent of the clients, and among the other 50 percent about half were one-parent families (Bol 2010: 31). This does not reflect the share of these household categories in the Dutch population. Apparently these types of households are less able to provide for their food needs than other household categories.

All 15 interviewed clients acknowledged the importance for them of this form of support. Eight of them also expressed their embarrassment or shame at not being able to solve their problems themselves, and five respondents were quite frustrated by the situation (Bol 2010: 51). Bol shows that in the literature on clients of food banks, embarrassment or shame is a major theme.

AIDS and food security in Tanzania

My former student Carolyn Nombo did her PhD research in a village called Mkamba in Tanzania, where above national-level HIV prevalence rates prevailed (Nombo 2007). Based on the evidence in the literature she expected households affected by HIV and AIDS to be less food secure than unaffected households.

However, among the 180 households in the survey she did not find a statistically significant relationship between the food-security status of the household and being HIV/AIDS-affected or not, although households with chronically ill members did prove to be significantly food insecure (Nombo 2007: 141-143).

Apart from several factors that could – at least partly – account for the lack of the expected significance, the qualitative research and observations during the survey interviews yielded an additional explanation, which was unexpected. Food security appeared to be a sensitive subject. The researcher had been prepared for the sensitivity of the subject of AIDS and had taken precautions to handle this, but she had not expected that people would be ashamed to admit that they had problems in meeting their food needs and would not truthfully answer the survey questions relating to this. The story of the “stone in the cooking pot” (Nombo 2007: 146) is illustrative. In case of acute food shortage a woman may put a stone in the cooking pot and place it on the fire. While the children and the neighbours think that a meal is being prepared, she then goes out in search of food.

Banana farmers in Uganda

Under my supervision, Monica Karuhanga Beraho did her PhD research among banana farmers in two districts in Uganda (Karuhanga Beraho 2008). Her study sheds additional light on the way households provide for their food needs, and which households do better than others in this respect.

In her survey among in total 541 banana-farming households Karuhanga also did not find a strong relationship between households affected by HIV and AIDS and household food-security status. The relationship was significant only at the 10 percent level. However, she did find a highly significant positive relationship between household size and food security and a highlyly significant negative relationship between household dependency ratio and food-security level (Karuhanga Beraho 2008: 283-285). In short, food secure households have many members but relatively few dependants.

Households, food and social change in China

My former student Juanwen Yuan did her PhD research in rural Guizhou, China, on household livelihoods and gender roles in a context of social change. To make social change visible, she analysed the performance of four cohorts of households. The oldest cohort comprised households formed in the 1970s, during the collective era and before the so-called ‘household responsibility system’ was put in place. The households of the youngest cohort were formed during 2000-2010 and included many labour migrants. In the urban areas migrants are exposed to new lifestyles and

consumption patterns. In the village, new houses are built from their remittances while the older people and the women who stayed behind, grow food crops. Yuan (2010: 158) concludes that while the oldest cohort experienced severe food shortage and even famine, the youngest cohort have other problems with food. They are food secure, but are worried about food safety because of increasing environmental pollution. In addition, new consumption patterns are developing and snacks are getting popular. In one of the focus group discussions it is said that people eat too much and grow fat.

Care and the facticity of households: A comparative perspective

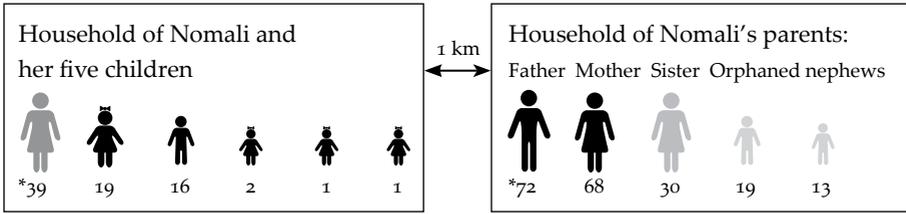
Based on Joan Tronto's conceptualization of phases of care (Tronto 1993) and the concept of the 'household production of health' (Berman et al. 1994), I developed a micro-ecological approach to health and care (Niehof 2004b). The core of this framework can be summarised as follows.

- The capability of a household to provide for primary needs influences the health and well-being of its members.
- Identifying care needs, taking responsibility for these, and giving care, starts in the daily environment of the home.
- Care practice always requires resources which have to be acquired and allocated by the household.
- When responding to care needs exceeds the household's competence and/or available resources, external support enters the care equation.
- Care needs and care provision are gendered.

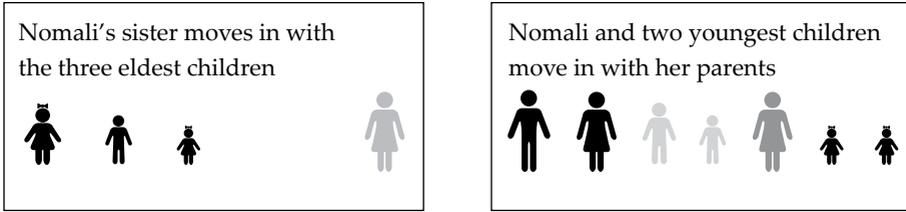
Care arrangements in rural KwaZulu-Natal in a context of HIV and AIDS

My former student Corrie du Preez did her PhD research in rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, on the way households arrange daily living and care to accommodate the care needs generated by the AIDS epidemic. The high prevalence of HIV and AIDS in this part of South Africa reversed rural-urban migration flows and led to movement of sick people in search of care, and of caregivers to the place where they are needed. The following figure pictures one case of movements between households, to care for a sick mother and her children during a period of only five months.

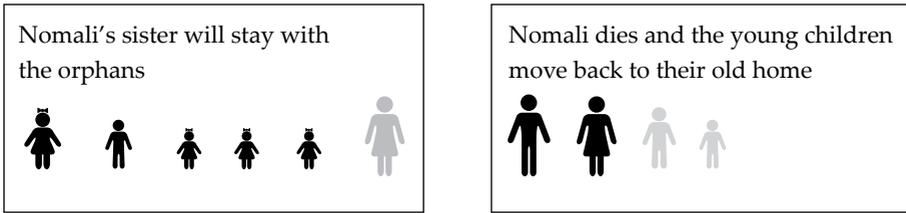
Stage 1: October 2006, Nomali is HIV+, relatively healthy



Stage 2: November 2006, Nomali has full-blown AIDS



Stage 3: February 2007, Nomali passes away



* Ages of household members
Source: Du Preez (2011:116)

Figure 2 Living arrangements of Nomali's and her parents' household

The cases described by Du Preez yield a picture of predominantly women who do the actual work as caregivers, adjust living arrangements to care needs, run the household(s), try to find help, and get child support grants. Of the 200 survey households, 84 were affected by HIV and AIDS. They had members suffering from AIDS, had adopted children orphaned by AIDS, or both (Du Preez 2011: 81). Without the "life-sustaining web" (Tronto 1993: 103) woven by these households, the people living with AIDS would live shorter, suffer more and die miserably.

Informal care [mantelzorg] in the Netherlands

The Dutch word *mantelzorg* refers to the care provided by household members, relatives, neighbours and friends that ensues from an existing social relationship. *Mantelzorg* comprises personal care, helping with or taking over activities that the care

receiver cannot do (anymore), and emotional support. In this part, I shall use the term *mantelzorg* for that kind of care and *mantelzorgers* for the caregivers. There is an enormous amount of *mantelzorg* going on in the Netherlands, as well as in other welfare states. According to the 2007 SCP survey among 2,461 *mantelzorgers*, 39 percent were male and 61 percent female. Of the men, 60 percent provided *mantelzorg* for their own wife. The composition of the households of *mantelzorgers* did not differ significantly from that of the Dutch population as a whole (De Boer et al. 2009: 30).

Let us look at a case described by my former student Katrien Luijkx in her PhD thesis (Luijkx 2001) on care arrangements for elderly people in a rural area in the Netherlands.

Mrs. Z. is a widow with five daughters and a son. After the death of her husband she moved to a house next to that of her eldest daughter and her family. Mrs. Z. gets professional help for the housework (three times a week) and for personal care by a nurse (twice a week). Her daughter and son-in-law help her to get out of bed and dress, prepare her meals, do the laundry, help her with her financial administration, and so on (Luijkx 2001: 95).

Elder care in rural Yogyakarta, Indonesia

Former student Iris Keasberry did PhD research in two villages in rural Yogyakarta, Indonesia, about elder care, old-age security and social change (Keasberry 2002). Of the 397 households of persons aged 55 and older only 15 (3.8%) were one-person households, 10.6 percent of the elderly lived only with their spouse, the rest with other people, with or without the spouse. Only 95 of the elderly respondents (24%) had no child living with them in the house. Significantly more daughters than sons were living with their parents. Of the 397 respondents, 198 (50%) had at least one child living in the same village (Keasberry 2002: 137-140, 236).

Based on the survey data and the many case studies, Keasberry (2002: 311-330) concluded that many of the elderly were still quite fit and did not need much support or care. Those who did need support, however, and did not have children living with them or in the same village, felt insecure and lonely, and sometimes went hungry.

The significance of the facticity of households

What do we have so far? In her beautiful book *Housekeeping*, the novelist Marilynne Robertson lets her protagonist say: "All this is fact. Fact explains nothing. On the contrary, it is fact that requires explanation" (Robinson 2005: 217). I agree. The question is how the facts I presented signify the facticity of households, whether in poor countries or in a rich one like the Netherlands.

Food

From the material I presented on food and the facticity of households a number of conclusions can be drawn. I shall mention three of these. *First*, household size and composition clearly are important factors in a household's risk of facing food shortages. *Second*, the purpose of households to provide for their members' food needs, is also a subjective reality. Failure to realize this gives rise to feelings of embarrassment and shame among the responsible household members. *Third*, food safety is not just an issue for households in rich countries. Where environmental pollution is insufficiently addressed – which is more often the case in poor than in rich countries – food safety can be at risk.

Care

The material presented on care shows that care arrangements differ from one context to another, for example regarding the role of professionals and support from the state. The pivotal actors in all arrangements, however, are household members or family living close by. Proximity is a key factor in care. In the South-African case, family members are moving back and forth between two homesteads to enable them to care for the sick mother and her young children. After her husband died, Mrs. Z. moved house to be close to her daughter. Living close enables people to identify care needs and to provide the care needed. Of the support networks people have, whether large or small, the core is located in the household, with an extension to parents or children living in the immediate vicinity.

Conclusion

The cases presented and their analysis made clear that, indeed, households are a fundamental fact of social life and that the 'moral economy' of the household (Cheal 1989) is a source of social security and care. By drawing on research from various social and cultural contexts, I showed that this applies in similar ways to different types of households.

If households, whatever their 'guise' – as Kabeer calls it, are to provide for the primary needs and well-being of their members, are they all capable of doing so? What if they lack the capabilities they need and cannot access the necessary resources? The large numbers of households that dissolve and disappear in areas burdened by high prevalence of HIV and AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa (Barnett and Whiteside 2002), testify to the failure of households in certain circumstances to deliver what they are supposed to do. The clients of the food banks are another case in point. When they are unable to provide for their members, households may dissolve or adjust their size or composition. Unlike the marital relationship or the parent-child relationship, household membership is not underpinned by law, which

is why household ties tend to be more fragile than marital or family ties, and the exit option is relatively easy (Ellickson 2008).

The inability of households to perform is also a matter of social justice (cf. Nussbaum 2003). When households lack the required joint capabilities, they should get support through appropriate social policies and programmes. So as to inform policy makers, research is needed into the factors that determine when households succeed or succumb. This could be done by conceptualizing households as complex adaptive systems (Page 2011) and applying agent-based modelling (Gilbert 2008). If this were an inaugural address instead of a farewell lecture, I would announce setting up such a project together with colleagues. But this lecture marks my retirement, and is drawing to a close. Now, thanks are due.

Thank you so much

Wageningen University, for offering me a working environment both stimulating and rewarding, that lasted for almost twenty years;
Students, for giving me the opportunity to share my knowledge and ideas and for forgiving me my lengthy sentences and my lack of performing talents;
PhDs, for their trust in me and for all that I learnt from them;
Members of the SCH chair group, for their unwavering friendship and support;
Colleagues of WU, including those on the Academic Board, for what I learnt from them, for working together with me, and for putting up with (though not necessarily accepting) my strong views on specific issues;
SSG support staff, for their patience in explaining to me how the continuously changing administrative and financial systems work, especially the digital ones;
Colleagues, family and friends, for taking the trouble to come here today;
The Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for generously funding the 2003-2011 AWLAE Project, AWLAE being the acronym of *African Women Leaders in Agriculture and the Environment*. To date it resulted in 17 African women scholars getting their doctorates in Wageningen, two more coming up later this year. Sadly, the AWLAE project coordinator, my colleague and friend professor Julia Gitobu, died in 2007 before she could witness the results of all the effort, inspiration and dedication she had put into the project. She would have been so proud of her AWLAE women.
Wageningen Academic Publishers, who set up the AWLAE Series that successfully produced 13 titles.
The aula staff, for their valuable and professional assistance at occasions like this and when chairing a promotion.
Last but not least: *My own family*, whom I owe a lot, but that is a private matter.

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Prof. dr Anke Niehof

'The household as an empirical reality is often taken for granted and as a concept contested. The lecture will first place the concept of household in a historical perspective and discuss the development of the field of household and consumer studies. Research evidence of the 'facticity' of households will be presented by examining the role of households in the provision of food and care in different societal contexts.'