

**If you want to understand inter-generational relations (IGR),  
households are a useless unit of measurement.**

Intergenerational relationships take many forms. They flow up and down generations, between kin and non-kin, inside and outside the household. They are sometimes experienced positively (enhancing people's lives) and sometimes they are experienced negatively (as a burden, or obligation, or generating conflicts). Some intergenerational relations are tangible (e.g.: financial exchanges, child care, physical help); others are intangible and take the form of affective, or emotional, support and care but are equally essential for well-being. IGR are often taken for granted, or so commonplace, that they are easily forgotten when asked about in a household survey context.

In Europe, where there is a large elderly population, there is considerable interest in intergenerational support and much of the understanding of the forms this takes comes from surveys based at the individual level rather than household level. Household surveys fail to capture intergenerational exchanges in two ways; firstly our data show that help and support *within* the household is rarely mentioned because it is largely taken for granted (for instance, people may assume that a resident daughter will cook and clean for her elderly father, or a wife care for her immobile husband). Secondly, household surveys focused on relationships and exchanges within the household, fail to capture a hugely diverse range of support systems which extend well beyond household members.

In our African study countries (Senegal, Burkina, Uganda where only around 5% of the population is over 60) there are few purpose-designed studies which research care and resource transfers between the generations. Research is largely dependent on analysis of household surveys which will only capture intergenerational relationships where there is co-residence and, furthermore, household definitions used in surveys often separate the generations even when they are residentially very close. Data users tend to assume that the elderly are automatically cared for by their children. Under such assumptions household data serve little purpose because they rarely focus on the content of intergenerational relationships or consider the implications of such an assumption for those older people who do not experience this care.

**Questions:**

Can household surveys ever be useful for understanding how intergenerational relationships operate?

How can we study the diverse forms of intergenerational relations (positive or negative) in resource poor environments?

Given the older population form such a small minority in Africa should precious resources and manpower be used to develop appropriate data collection tools?

Re: by [Elwood Carlson](#)

While it is true that intergenerational relationships extend beyond household boundaries, variability in the extent to which household settings "capture" or contain such relationships provides essential baseline information about how kinship interacts with other institutional dimensions of societies. The highest obstacle to understanding the full extent of intergenerational relationships in any society stems from the fact that these relationships cut across households living in separate residential settings; both the residential distribution of people and their kinship connections are important, but finding and interviewing respondents is nearly always much more difficult when trying to trace scattered kinship links than when concentrating on coresident households. While typical household-based surveys do not usually gather much information about kin connections outside the household, there is no intrinsic reason (except cost) why such surveys could not seek out such links in the same way as individual-based surveys. After all, individual-based surveys usually also are structured around sampling schemes based on residential locations as the universe from which to sample.

Re: by [Ben Wilson](#)

Hi Elwood, I completely agree with your above post, and was trying to make a similar point in my post (for the first question) yesterday. A quick question. Do you know of any medium/large-scale surveys that don't use the household as the sampling unit? I was trying to think last night whether there's a legitimate alternative to the household-based sample surveys that we're all familiar with. If there isn't then I would guess we just need to think of how best to collect intergenerational data within the existing framework.

Re: by [Alexandra Fanghanel](#)

Thanks to you both. Is not one of the problems with the household as unit of enumeration for intergenerational exchanges of care that within a household different household members might do different care? the Generations and Gender Survey does talk about the household and help received by the household but does not ask the respondent to answer about other inter household transfers that might be going on other than those in which the respondent is him or herself involved in:[http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/pau/docs/ggp/2005/GGP\\_2005\\_Publ\\_3Quest.pdf](http://www.unece.org/fileadmin/DAM/pau/docs/ggp/2005/GGP_2005_Publ_3Quest.pdf)

Do you think this can be captured? Do you think it matters not to capture all the help and exchange of resources in and out of the household as long as some is captured?

Re: by [Mauricio Rodríguez](#)

Well in Mexico we have the Time Use Survey (<http://www.inegi.org.mx/est/contenidos/Proyectos/encuestas/hogares/especiales/enut/Default.aspx>)

In this survey respondents are asked about the time they spend in everyday activities, including time transfers on people outside the household. Also, the survey asks about the help each member in the household receives from other households.

Re: by [Loic Trabut](#)

The Handicap santé ménage survey in France is a survey which considers the question of the relationships around disabled or dependent persons in terms of the help they receive. In addition to the households involved in the survey, 5,000 professional or other helpers were questioned about the forms of help they provided, as well as about the characteristics of the individual, bringing to light various forms of inter-generational transfer within this support as a whole.

[http://www.insee.fr/fr/publications-et-services/docs\\_doc\\_travail/F1109.pdf](http://www.insee.fr/fr/publications-et-services/docs_doc_travail/F1109.pdf)

However this type of survey involves a large amount of work devoted to specific questions.

The problem of the predominance of the nuclear model in France is a question of current concern, and one which influences the description of intergenerational relations. For example the French census does not enable linkages between three generations to be captured. Although the census is not designed to describe inter-generational relations, it should still be able to describe families in which there must be a strong presumption that inter-generational relationships exist. However in terms of the census we are still a long way from the issues of the modalities of exchange within a single household, because the census does not enable us to distinguish 2 families co-habiting in one household-dwelling from one family consisting of three generations. To take the example of a single-parent family living with parents following the break-up of a couple, the census will translate the information into a household composed of two families: one single parent family and one couple without children, and so will make the link between the parents and their child (one of the two parents of the single parent family) disappear. The incidence of this type of information is not negligible if one is counting family types or calculating amounts of inter-generational support. So what might be the incidence and therefore the bias this mis-counting might introduce into public policy-making? For example the withdrawal from the labour market by parents of single parent families cannot be understood in the same way if it takes place within a multi-generational household as if it takes place alone. This lack of detailed data on the modalities of family composition within a household casts doubt on the utility of the census as an instrument for describing a population.

Although one cannot describe “how inter-generational relations work”, and indeed before understanding the “how”, it would be a help to be able to give an accurate description of a family, at least as it exists within a household

While the phenomenon of co-location increases in importance progressively as students stay for increasingly long times with their parents, and elderly people return to living with their children, the census enables only a very partial view of these forms of co-habitation within the household. These kinds of phenomena will only show up in the census in the form of a juxtaposition of families or individuals without other kinship links besides those of the nuclear family. Did you know, for example, that ordinary households in France cannot contain more than two families for census purposes? A potential third family would be considered as isolated individuals within the household. Although there are other surveys which enable families in France to be described, the census ought to provide a framework of better quality.

Re: by [C. Duchene-Lacroix](#)

To understand inter-generational relations (IGR), households are alone a useless unit of measurement, but not a useless aspect of the forms of IGR. We could describe IGR today as multilocal relationships in a system of residential units, let say “household system”. Within this system the space-time distance between the local units of a family group is relevant.

We have to better know which kind of relationship is involved inside the dwelling between each cohabitant and also to better know the strong relationships outside the dwelling (family ties, overnight possibilities by friends). So could we compare the inside/outside relationships and define dwelling-household effects. In addition to the description of formal IGR we must characterize the content of the exchanges: who share a budget with whom? Who shares or receives care? The problem is to implement the complexity of such an issue within a few questions.

Some people suggest that a household could be defined as a group of persons who share a budget or affection and favours beyond residential units. Is it also your mind, dear colleagues?

Re: by [C. Duchene-Lacroix](#)

Caroline Kramer, Professor at KIT Karlsruhe and member of the multilocality network, has done work on the German survey of the time budgets of households. This research experience led her to the issue of multi-residentiality and the household.

Caroline Kramer’s webpage:

[http://www.ifgg.kit.edu/58\\_Caroline%20Kramer.php#block128](http://www.ifgg.kit.edu/58_Caroline%20Kramer.php#block128)

Presentation of the survey:

[https://www.destatis.de/EN/Meta/abisz/Zeitbudgeterhebung\\_e.html](https://www.destatis.de/EN/Meta/abisz/Zeitbudgeterhebung_e.html)

There should be scope for collaboration here.

Re: by [Natacha Compaore](#)

Hi everyone. Inter-generational relationships have become a subject of interest both for the countries of the North with their aging populations and for those of the South. However in countries like Burkina Faso, and I imagine the same must be true of many other countries, elderly people do not seem to be a population group of interest to surveys. There are very few data on them. The EDS exclude them on principle on the grounds of age (EDS surveys are concerned with men and women of reproductive age), and censuses isolate them from the rest of the “family” by nuclearizing households. It is important in statistical terms to nuclearize in order to “count properly”, but this means that it is impossible to capture the inter-generational relationships in such contexts, because the flows which may take place between older and younger people are not visible. The result is that surveys reduce inter-generational relationships to transfers (which are detected in economic surveys) but the whole non-material dimension which takes an affective, daily interactional or social form is hidden from view.

Re: by [Guy NDEFFO](#)

Hello everyone. In the background statement it mentions that inter-generational transfers take place.... within and also outside the household. I find that this statement is very revealing in terms of the answer to the first question, whether household surveys can be useful in understanding how inter-generational relationships work. I would say yes, to a certain extent, in answer to this first question. In fact research aiming to understand inter-generational transfers must also take account of those within households. But to limit it solely to a household level survey would be a limitation on the scope of the phenomenon to be researched. So we have to get rid of this limitation by adding to household surveys other surveys referred to as complementary, which will enable us to cover persons who are for example in collective households such as boarding schools, prisons, lodging houses etc) which are often excluded from household censuses. In the case of elderly people who currently seem marginal, it is simply a matter of enhancing the data collection techniques used in household surveys by adding modules or sections dealing with this particular target group from the transfers point of view. I recall the experience of the MICS3 survey in which a module on vulnerable and orphan children (OV) was included in order to measure the support (medical, emotional or psychological, material, social, educational) which a child resident in a household would receive from age 0 to 17. Once data collection methods are widened for household surveys, one would need to collect household data and also use a survey to cover those not within households. Including a specific module on elderly people in surveys normally undertaken will create a funding problem to adapt collection methods without affecting the scarce resources devoted to surveys. I agree with Natacha Compaoré in saying that these people fall into a gap which current statistical methods are not filling and which we have to bridge. In doing this we have to include all the

aspects needed for a thorough analysis of the problem, and to remind ourselves that we are all bound to get old.

Re: by [Eva Lelievre](#)

Let me share with you this morning's experience concerning the collection of household members. We are surveying a sample of adolescents and their parents in Northern Thailand. In this quantitative survey, household composition is one of the elements explored to approach the network of the teenagers and how they socialize. School, peer groups etc. are being explored as well.

Both the teenager (in a self completed questionnaire) and the accompanying parent who is interviewed face to face are asked about the household composition, the survey takes place in the local health centre.

The interviews are conducted in Thai... Comes the part of the accompanying parent's interview when household composition is addressed: after having put the required question about "who lives in the household with you" the interviewer adds "who sleeps there?" and spontaneously forms with both hands a gesture figuring a roof or a container. A problem occurs with the answer... "there is also the grand-mother, she cooks and eats there and my daughter (the adolescent of the survey) she sleeps with in her grand-ma in the house next door?..." And later you learn that both houses belong to the grand-ma...

Does the interviewer count her in or out?

Who goes in the household composition? No hesitation, around the adolescent the cohabiting circle *cum* economic unit comprises her parents and the grand-ma. Nevertheless if we had been enumerating with the water board, we would have counted two separate households (one with the grand-mother and her grand-daughter) as both houses have a tap.

Of course, collection definition criteria must be clear, realistic but the questionnaires must offer solutions for the exemptions that the enumerators will find in the field. In other words we must allow for ways to describe the less common situations (which are surprisingly numerous) so that their classification can be made *ex-post* by the research team or the statistical office. The people themselves or the enumerators should not have to take decisions in order to "fit" unusual configurations into too simple household types. Doing so, with simplified definitions we run the risk to miss emerging HH types, to artificially favor a simplified *a-priori* HH typology.

Large national collections are important to identify marginal and emerging HH types, therefore it is not only in smaller scale research surveys but also in national household surveys that HH collection tools must allow the description of the "unusual situations" for eventual later classification and not force the enumerator to decide on the spot who is counted in and who is counted out.

Re: by [Ernestina Coast](#)

Thanks for this report "from the field" - a nice example of the tensions that exist when doing social science research - and I suspect that many of the people involved in these online discussions have similar experiences in very different settings. You raise an interesting point about how survey professionals design surveys from the perspective of the tensions that arise in the field. It is interviewers who have to negotiate face-to-face with potential respondents, and interviewers often have to make decisions about who is "in" and who is "out" on the basis of instructions they have been provided with. I would be interested to hear about any surveys that do allow such ex-post decisions

Perhaps one approach would be to collect complex relationships using a household grid where each person's relationships to every other person in the unit is collected, rather than the more usual "relationship to household head". This sort of approach would not be too onerous for many cross-sectional surveys, even in settings where resources for data collection are particularly limited? Then, the analysts could apply different household definitions to the data that have been collected, according to their needs.

From my perspective, I have concerns are about the extensive secondary analysis of household survey data by analysts who (appear to) show very little evidence of having considered the implications of the definition of the household for the data they are analysing. I am not suggesting that only those people that collect data should be involved in its analysis - of course not. There are good examples of the international sharing of information about what definitions and research instruments were used (for example the Household Survey Network, IPUMS etc). However, there seems to be rather less attention paid to questioning these definitions and their implications for the analyses that are done. Perhaps this recognition has to start with training. If analysts are not taught to be alert to questioning the data that they consume - beyond simply testing whether the data are "normal" or contain mistakes for example - then they will continue to consume data and analyse them without considering the implications for the conclusions of their analyses?

Re: by [Setephen Wandera](#)

Beginning with the first question, i think that household surveys can be used as a benchmark for understanding intergenerational relationships. At the moment, most household surveys focus on capturing relationships to the household head which becomes limiting for capturing links with near and distant housheolds. Consequently, data analyses around the subject can not adequately capture various forms of social support for example healthcare for the elderly.

Secondly, from the experience of conducting key informant interviews in Uganda with researchers, NGOs working with the elderly, i would suggest that indepedent studies or surveys should be tailored to address issues of the elderly and capture intergenerational links just like AIDS surveys are done. Developed countries have done this succesfully. Developing countries should follow suit despite the small proportions of the older persons.

Finally, scientific studies have focused on minority groups even in Africa. Why not the elderly? We know very well that the UN projections stipulate that by 2050, the population of the elderly shall grow and outstrip that of the children. As it is said, "preparation is a friend of success", developing countries need to build research capacity and train their healthcare providers to address this challenge before it becomes late for us!

Re: by [Ben Wilson](#)

To summarise the considered responses above, we have: (1) inter-generational relations (IGRs) within households, (2) IGRs outside households. Clearly we often have problems with (2). If we collect all household relationships, as Ernestina suggests, then any intergenerational relationships within the household can be identified. Then it remains to collect non-household relationships. Perhaps we should have a non-household grid question for key family members. Of course, this could be problematic for proxy respondents, and we would need to define "key family members" (perhaps just parents and children, perhaps those who transfer resources to the HH and those who receive resources from the HH, perhaps based on care-giving/time-use etc). Nevertheless, much of these data are collected already (at least partially or in a less systematic form) in some national surveys. Perhaps these could be a starting point for testing and development of improved questions/surveys.