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Private Households in Central Asia

Methodological Reflections on
an Empirical Research
(2012-2014)

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Private Households in Central Asia: Methodological Reflections on an Empirical Research (2012-2014)

By Heiko Schrader[1]

Paper held during the "**7th Annual Conference on Methods in Social Sciences in Moscow**" from 23-24 September, 2016 and extended for this publication.

Abstract: Against the background of a larger research project on households in Central Asia, this paper addresses four different methodological problems: language problems in cross-cultural research, methodological problems with insufficiently trained research personnel (being addressed by research trainings before the research), the problem of who shall be interviewed in a household survey (household-level approach chosen); and the methodological problem of a closed household conception (here overcome by an open household concept which includes kin networks. Furthermore, the paper addresses the question of how to measure household "incomes" and "expenditures".

Keywords: household survey, household-level approach, open household concept, Sustainable Livelihoods Approach, semiotics

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[1] I am thankful to Knut Petzold for his fruitful comments on the first version of the paper.

1 Introduction

In a research project financed by the Volkswagen Foundation my colleague Eckhard Dittrich and I investigated how households in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in very different economic, political and national environments try to achieve sustainable livelihoods. The core-underlying question of research was whether after 25 years under post-Soviet conditions the households have taken responsibility for their own conduct of life (“Lebensführung” in the sense of Max Weber) or whether they still display attitudes of relying on the “nanny” state concerning their family lives.[2] That is, the core question concerns the achieved transformation from Soviet conditions into a market society. More concretely, we investigated which life strategies the households take to achieve sustainable livelihoods, how far they utilize the organizations of the evolving markets such as banks, insurance companies, etc. or how far they rely on their own personal networks.[3]

The research followed a mixed team approach concerning international comparative investigations. It was conducted by three research teams from North Kazakhstan, South Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Research directors were my colleague and I, supported by a Magdeburgean team of three Central Asian research scholars. The research consisted of a non-representative household survey based on 450 questionnaires (first stage),[4] and of 120 qualitative interviews (second stage). We already used the preliminary findings from the quantitative survey for building the interview guide of the qualitative part. The interviews were conducted both in urban and rural regions: in the major economic centers of the two countries, namely Astana and Almaty in Kazakhstan and Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan and their rural environments, namely Akmola Oblast around Astana, Almaty Oblast around Almaty and Chui region close to Bishkek. The rural-urban distinction was the first quota sample set in advance, the second one was an exclusion of poor and rich households from our samples, because we wanted to cover a broad spectrum of middle-class households, and the third one was to include different household types such as extended family households, nuclear family households and single-headed households. The findings of the research have meanwhile been published (Dittrich and Schrader 2015; Dittrich and Schrader 2016).[5]

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[2] There are a number of reports on family life and households, and the policy towards the family was not consistent during the entire Soviet times. When we refer to the nanny state in socialism this means that the state interfered into, and socialized important spheres of family life: education (Moral Code of the Builder of Communis**m** (Russian: Моральный кодекс строителя коммунизма)), subsidies for poor households (although poverty was officially non-existent in the Soviet Union, cf. Schrader (2000)), provision of living space, kindergartens, old age security, heath security, subsidies for cultural goods, etc.. At the same time, due to scarcity of consumer goods and food, family networks had an important informal exchange function for improving the everyday-life situation. This also concerned rural-urban exchanges/subsidies. In Central Asia, extended family structures and networks played a much more important role than in Russia (cf. Imbrogno 1986; Bertaux et al. 2005).

[3] We use sustainability in the sense of the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA), which considers household strategies with access to different capital forms to stabilize households in difficult and unstable living conditions at the edge of poverty (see later in this paper).

[4] We did not intend to reach representativeness, since this exceeded the capacity of our research teams; however, the sample should be large enough for making bi-variate analysis of the data in the three regional subsamples.

[5] http://www.lit-verlag.de/isbn/3-643-90525-3; the Russian version is an open-access publication that can be downloaded from this page.

Important for the research design was the idea not only to aim at the research results but also at teaching the entire research cycle to our colleagues in Central Asia. Here I shall focus among other things on the research trainings which the teams in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan obtained by the Magdeburgean team, concerning quantitative and qualitative research. The reason to take up this training was our experience from other researches in post-socialist countries, where we learned that particularly qualitative research was so far underdeveloped and scholars are very hesitant to go into that method.[6]

This paper will focus on methodological issues. I will consider four methodological concerns:

(a) Language problems in cross-cultural studies;

(b) The research-cum-training approach chosen to improve the skills of researchers employed;

(c) The question of who shall be interviewed in household surveys (household-level approach); and

(d) The suggestion why we should use an open household concept in household research.

2 Language problems in cross-cultural studies

Language problems provide a major threat for cross-cultural studies. Every research project needs a common language in which the researchers communicate to each other. Which language will be chosen certainly depends on the language skills of the participants but also on the language of the final report or book to be published for a certain international community; it is favorable that all material later on to be used for the publication is in the same language. Although we all live in a globalized world, language matters particularly when we work across language areas, i.e. the Russian speaking and the English speaking worlds (Germany is too small; we did not think about German language); for many scholars access to the other language world is closed or constrained simply because of lack of knowledge of that other language. The other way around, publications in that foreign language will not be available or not affordable in their home region.

However, linguistic areas and their *lingua francas* do not necessarily present the local languages. In our case this meant that after 25 years of post-socialism not everybody is still fluent in Russian any more. This is also due to language policies, e.g. in Kazakhstan to promote Kazakh language and even require its knowledge to get a public job, for eventually replacing the ethnic Russian population in important strategic fields. In our research, due to a number of ethnic groups in our sample, interviewers took interviews in Russian, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek and even Uyghur languages. Depending on the methodologies involved this requires different language versions of the questionnaires (in our case Russian, Kazakh, Kyrgyz), of the interview guide, and particularly the ability of interviewers to conduct interviews in the preferred language of the respondent.

However, the major problem that I want to address is how to find appropriate translations for the key terms, both in setting up questions as well as making transcript analysis.[7] Automatic

[6] The Centre of Independent Social Research (CISR) in St. Petersburg e.g. has therefore specialized in training sociologists and social anthropologists in qualitative methods; https://cisr.ru/en/educenter/trainings/ Access date 26-10-2016.

[7] Not addresses here is that some languages are richer, i.e. more differentiated, in their vocabulary, and some are less rich.

translation programs in the Internet do not help us at all, since a right selection for an appropriate translation dependent on context. A wrong term chosen either does not make any sense for the respondent (he or she simply does not understand the question), or he/she starts thinking into a direction which is not intended and gives the "wrong" answers.

What is evident from a descriptive research perspective can also scientifically be discussed from the perspective of semiotics.[8] Language constitutes a sequence of signs (Saussure et al. 1983, 80) to which meaning is attached. Meaning is generated from the life-world of the speaker and listener. Applied to our question of cross-cultural studies, every culture attaches a particular shared meaning to a word. According to different cultural meanings the word "village" e.g. can transport quite different understandings depending on the shared meaning; "Village" can e.g. mean "communitarized life world" or "battlefield" between different ethnic or religious groups.

To make it short, communication is a two-way process; understanding each other means not so much using the same words, but also relating the same meaning to it. Otherwise, communication (and analysis in qualitative research) cannot work adequately. A useful tool for cross-cultural studies is therefore to deconstruct the cultural meanings of words to find the same level of communication and reconstruct it anew.

For cross-cultural communication, this explains why second-language speakers usually have difficulty to understand and simultaneously construct sense, because their own cultural frame of reference is not helpful for this "translation" process of sense giving, while they do not sufficiently know the foreign cultural frame. In the same way, most people cannot express themselves in second or foreign language in a rich way, which may again cause communication problems into the other directions.

These cross-cultural communication problems also explain why researchers should adapt themselves to the first language of the respondent if possible and if necessary.[9]

It is evident that the problem does not only concern right terms and interpretation of terms, but also the right language level for the respondent. If the language level is too abstract, people with lower education do not get the idea; however, if the researcher brings an example to make the matter more concrete, he or she already will influence the respondent in his or her way of thinking.(cf. Flick 2009) Therefore, from my point of view, pre-tests are necessary in cross-cultural research to check in advance, how far researchers and respondents really understand each other. We made pre-tests for our questionnaire and adapted it afterwards, and we also pre-tested our interview guide in advance.

3 Research trainings

What was new in our research design and therefore interesting for our funding agency was the idea of bringing the teaching of methods into our project, to take the involved researchers and assistants to international standards. For that reason, the German research team conducted two three-day trainings: a quantitative and a qualitative one, where we invited all the researchers of the Kazakhstani and Kyrgyzstani research teams to participate in two of the involved universities in Central Asia. The participants were mainly PhD scholars of the Central Asian institutions with some theoretical, but no practical knowledge in data gathering.

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[8] cf. Lash 1991; Pablé and Hutton 2015; Robinson 2015; Solomoniķ and Schwartz 2015.

[9] For further reading e.g. Voldnes et al. (2014),Fröhlich (2012)

The training workshops followed my methodological teaching at Magdeburg University.[10] In our research project we started explaining the core idea of the research project, the theories and methodology used[11]. This also meant to discuss the specifics of household studies compared to individual interviews (I will come to that point later on). For the quantitative part of our research, we had designed the questionnaire in a joint conference with the three research team leaders, translated them into the specific interview languages, pre-tested in the regions with regard to appropriate terms used and the appropriate language level found, and readjusted. We had decided that the interviewers should directly communicate with the respondents, raising the questions and taking up their verbal answers into the questionnaire. By doing so, we wanted to avoid high item non-response rates.

We trained the interviewers

(i) how to select a sample. In our research we gave them pre-defined quotas for specific sub-samples such as household types according to composition of household members, expected household income class, etc. (which meant we wanted to exclude really poor people and rich people because of our middle class bias). The final selection, however, had to be taken by the interviewers, and they should be aware of what they were doing (e.g. when you work with the snowball system you only get people from the same social background); we also discussed such methodological questions as when it is an expected appropriate time to visit households (i.e. when we can expect to meet many household members at home);

(ii) how to get a consent for taking an interview: referring to scientific research, to anonymity, time necessary to take the, who should be interviewed in the household (this is one of our key methodological problems to be discussed separately later on), how to pose the questions and write down the answers in the questionnaire so that the transfer of the data into the SPSS matrix was easy.

(iii) put the data into a pre-defined SPSS spreadsheet (already including the variables) and do first univariate analyses.[12]

After the trainings, the different research teams took the questionnaires in their research regions, collected the data and put them into the SPSS spreadsheet.

After a preliminary analysis, we then already integrated some interesting quantitative findings into the development of an interview guide for the qualitative research phase. In a joint meeting with the team leaders, we discussed the intention of the interview guide as well as the method of taking qualitative interviews. Before we did the second research training on qualitative methods, we again did the pretest in the fields and adapted the guides.

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[10] I teach research practice by going through the different phases of the research cycle with an empirical practicing of every participant within a given research topic. In quantitative research, this involves developing a questionnaire and collecting information from a limited sample, as well as doing some practices in univariate and bivariate analysis. In qualitative research, this involves developing an interview guide, taking an interview, transcript and coding, and analysis, while every step is accompanied by the supervisor.

[11] In the quantitative training, this involved data gathering by questionnaire as well as univariate and bi-variate analysis with SPSS, in the qualitative training we taught problem-centered and expert interviews with narrative passages.

[12] I did the bi-variate analysis on my own when we found that the latter exceeded the capacities of the participants.

The qualitative research training involved the team leaders and the qualitative interviewers. Since the entire research process took a long time, those people who participated in the training were not necessarily the same as in the quantitative part. Qualitative research is so far less frequent in Central Asia than quantitative research. This does not mean that it is not taught in the curricula; but if it is taught this happens on a very abstract level. For the qualitative training, we put the emphasis on how to take problem-centered interviews, transcript, coding and analysis. Always the same problem for students is to remain flexible in raising the questions; this requires listening to the respondent while at the same time deciding which follow-up question is appropriate or whether a certain issue from the answer should be deepened.[13] It is also necessary to understand the different intentions of a questionnaire and an open-questioned interview guide. Another issue of the training was research ethics such as guaranteeing anonymity, openness in methodology, and the like.

However, every qualitative researcher knows that for a rich qualitative interview the researcher needs experience.[14] In our case, the research teams consisted of some professional qualitative researchers from research institutions as well as rather unexperienced lecturers and PhD scholars, who more or less followed a hands-on approach with a field-guide provided by the team leaders. I have to admit that the quality of the interviews depended very much on the skills of the researcher at not only on the respondents' willingness to talk. We can see that from the length of the interviews and transcripts. On average the interviews of experienced researchers took much longer (i.e., between 1 ½ or two hours, which sometimes came to the transcript of up to 40 pages), while interviews of unexperienced researchers were 30 to 40 minutes, and in the latter cases questions of the interview guide were worked through one after another, like in the questionnaire where you ask about facts and not about explanations or reasoning; flexibility was missing. You could easily see that experienced researchers got the respondents into narrations, while unexperienced ones were not successful in doing so, or even did not try that at all.

In so far, our integrated research training during research cycle could not fully reach its goal of really improving the skills of most employed researchers.[15] They were newcomers in the field of empirical qualitative research. Particularly researchers could not learn from their mistakes which experienced researchers find in their transcripts; this would require test interviews and individual feedbacks, or a final feedback after conducting interviews and writing transcripts.[16]

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[13] We included partnership exercises (with switching the roles) of interviewing techniques. My colleague and I also made a role-play of what might happen if the respondent understands a question in a different way than expected.

[14] E.g. (Moch and Gates 2000)

[15] This would, for example, require accompanying the researchers into the field, observing them in their interview guidance and then give them feedback on the spot. I did such trainings with small groups of Magdeburgean students in field research, e.g. in slum research in India in 2004, 2007 and 2014, The results can be found in the Magdeburgean working paper series, No. 71, 54, 52 and 36,, see http://www.isoz.ovgu.de/Forschung+_+Publikationen/Arbeitsberichte.html.

[16] This is of course possible in another post-training course or at least in individual skype discussions with the researchers. However, this would have shifted the research design even more to a training process than to result findings.

However, an advantage of involving university staff and PhD scholars was that many of them were keen in learning and not only interested in the financial benefits. Thus, we hope that next time they can use their experiences made.

4 Whom shall be interviewed in household research?

The core unit of our analysis is the private household, which consists of several household members. This implies a certain basic methodological problem: who is supposed to be interviewed? While older surveys define the formal head of the household (usually the husband) as the respondent,[17] because he is assumed to bring the (mayor) income, to have the best knowledge and to decide about household affairs, the empirical question in our time is whether this older approach which assumes a nuclear family with clear-cut traditional gender roles of male income earner and female housewife is still appropriate for our time. Newer studies reveal that the formal head of a household (usually an administrative denomination) may not necessarily be the main breadwinner; also, women contribute to household incomes and sometimes exceed the incomes of their husbands.[18] Furthermore, in many regions in the world women are responsible for the household budgets and the distribution of money for particular household purposes. Additionally, other conceptions may cut across the household head conceptions: in some more traditional societies like in Central Asia, the role of decision making is attributed to the oldest male, who is called “household head”, whether he is the main bread winner or not. If he will pass away, decision-making may shift to the oldest woman or to one of their sons living with them (depending on culture this is either the oldest or the youngest son).

The more recent approaches in household research try to avoid these problems by arguing that it is not important who reports on the household, because we are interested in the research entity and not the individual respondent. Thus, the so-called “household-level approach“ (Hess and al. 2000) does not pre-define who shall be asked. The respondent is considered as an “expert on his own behalf” (Meuser and Nagel 1991) in a particular household chore. In practice, this means that the interviewee may shift during the interview from husband to wife, their parents/parents in law or even to their children or other people who live in the household. Always that person should speak who believes that he or she may contribute best to a particular question.

What sounds good in methodology, involves many problems in practice. First, we already mentioned that it depends very much on the daytime whom we will meet at home. Researchers have to take this into account when planning the interviews. Second, households do not consist of egalitarian people. Age and/or gender hierarchies may cut across knowledge, which means, due to household hierarchies, those people who have the best knowledge do not get voice. For example, a wife is not free in telling her opinion when her husband is present. Secondly, a good researcher is not satisfied with aggregate data on households but wants to get deeper into household structures, rolls and power relations. Therefore, not only infor-

[17] Most household surveys measure the household budget and implicitly or explicitly assume that the household head takes decisions about household expenditures. This pre-defined him as respondent. For the problems evolving from this proceeding and male bias, see e.g. https://www.google.de/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=10&ved=0ahUKEwj6nMa7q_jPAhVEWBoKHa9SB10QFghyMAk&url=http%3A%2F%2Fmihaylofaculty.fullerton.edu%2Fsites%2Fkkleinjans%2FMan_of_the_house_finalforth.pdf&usg=AFQjCNFBoZ-s45DP7qqn029mRD92K75t0A&cad=rja

[18] Cf. Pollak (1985); Scanzoni (1980)

mation obtained is valuable, but also from whom we got that information (and how far the response may be biased due to a particular role or function in the household). Participant observation may contribute to mapping the household's power structures. It is again a matter of experience of whether a researcher can apply this already difficult conception of household level approach while additionally doing participant observation or network analysis techniques.

In the household-level approach it is necessary to collect information on all household members with regard to what they are doing in and outside the household and their relatedness to each other (e.g. Natasha: daughter in law of Igor and Svetlana). This information is necessary to assess such highly abstract measures such as household income or expenditure. A household income/expenditure is then the sum of incomes/expenditures of the household members.

The issue is, however, even more complicated when we take into account the findings about subsistence production (e.g. Evers et al. 1984; 1987; Turnham et al. 1990; Schrader 1999). "Incomes" can be both monetary and in kind. The latter usually do not show up in official statistics but contribute to the household as either income (informal wages, sales of subsistence produce in the market) or reduction of expenditure (own consumption). To take a much broader perspective on a household we worked with the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (see later) which measures access to different capital forms, including subsistence production, access to infrastructure, nature, information and so on.

In practice, we started our interviews by collecting information of who lives in the household and does which kind of activity. This addressed also such activities like "housework" and other work on the subsistence level outside formal and informal wage labor contracts such as looking after the garden, the cattle or the grandchildren – often a role that pensioners take, who themselves contribute to the household income with their transfers from the state. However, already during the discussions among the research teams and after the pilot interviews it became obvious that household members predominantly thought in monetary incomes and processions so that more precise questions on the other activities were necessary.

5 A plea for an open household conception

Household research is specific insofar that we have to aggregate information of usually a group people living under the same roof and pooling some of their incomes for basic goods.[19] Families are usually defined as social units consisting of people being related by kinship and/or marriage; they do, however, not necessarily share the same roof.[20] For a certain period households and families may be made up by the same people (nuclear family households), but during the life cycle of a family the household composition may change. Furthermore, non-relatives may also live in the household.[21]

In demography and most household surveys, households constitute closed entities under the same roof. The family concept is more open insofar that it refers to a kin network structure

[19] "A multi-person household, defined as a group of two or more persons living together who make common provision for food or other essentials for living" http://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/sconcerns/fam/fammethods.htm (access date 17-7-16). The exception is the single household

[20] Cf. http://www.thefreedictionary.com/family (access date 17-10-2016)

[21] Cf. Weiske/Petzold/Zirold (2008), Schier (2015), (2013)

independent from the place of living, whereas, however, the pooling of incomes usually gets lost. For our household survey, we tried to combine the two aspects by using an open household concept. It allows consideration for the household being embedded in a resource network. This means that households fit into different categories of network-type, namely closed, giving, receiving and both giving and receiving household. Receiving households are such where external people contribute to the household (in monetary and non-monetary terms), f.e. migrants of the family who work abroad and send remittances (which frequently occurs in Kyrgyzstan) or family members who settled in the city and financially support their parents in the countryside, but also the other way around may occur when children go to the city for higher education and receive cash or kind contributions from their parents (so that the household becomes a giving household).

Figure 1
The private household as a resource network

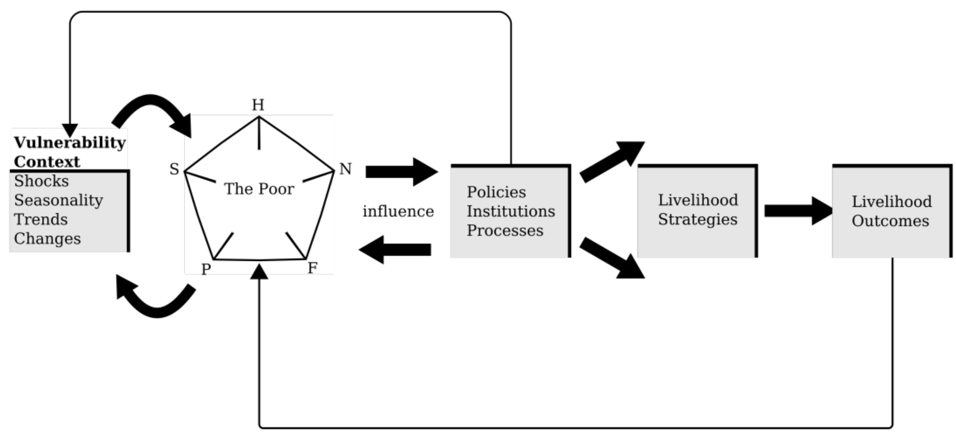
Transmittances/Transfers from outside
Migrants, relatives, non-related people

Household
Household members with/without incomes

Transfers to outside
Dependent relatives and non-related people

We combined this open-household conception with a wider sociological conception on capital forms (cf. Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1990). We put this conception into a particular research design originating from poverty research in developing countries: the “Sustainable Livelihoods Approach” (SLA). Key issue is that households have different access to different capital forms, and that some capital forms may compensate for each other. Household revenues do not only concern money and property, but also other resources, namely foot, knowledge and advice, labor, and so on. For assessing the livelihoods situation of a household, all these capital forms have to be considered in the research design.

Figure 2
The sustainable livelihoods framework



Source: https://www.ifad.org/topic/resource/tags/sla/2179541*; 22.03.13*

While this approach originates from poverty research, we adapted it to our topic of investigating middle-class households. Applying this approach to our research meant to collect information on different capital forms in both the questionnaires and qualitative interviews:

- Financial capital
- Social capital
- Human capital
- Natural capital
- Physical capital

The application of this approach was suitable, since it is appropriate to take the different provision of capital forms in urban and rural households into consideration. Particularly rural households can substitute a lack of financial capital by natural capital, and they suffer from insufficient access to physical capital (road infrastructure, public transport system) and human capital (higher education in the countryside).

6 Summary

Before the background of a larger research project on households in Central Asia, this paper addressed methodological problems in cross-cultural research in general (language problems, methodological problems of trained research personnel, overcome by research trainings) and household surveys in particular, here described with the household-level approach (which collects detailed information on household members and their monetary and non-monetary contribution to the household) and an open household concept which tries to combine the advantages of both the location-specific household conception and the network-specific kinship conception.

In our opinion, the applied combination of household-level approach, open-household concept and Sustainable Livelihoods approach is very promising for household surveys, because it considers households as being connected to resource flows. However, it requires well-trained research scholars for the collection and interpretation of information.

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