

European comparative ways of using family histories

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I am going to talk about a relatively new method - cases histories of families. I have been using it in several research projects, with very rich results. I will start with a definition of family case history. Then I will proceed to describe how it has been used in a comparative European Research Project on poverty and precariousness among migrant families living in Italy, Great-Britain, Portugal, Sweden, Finland, Ireland and France. I will focus mostly on sociological findings in different contexts of inequality and migration.

With case histories of families one can talk about a number of social processes and, most importantly, how there are connected to each other. In short, one can explore what people do in given situations as in the situation of in-migration, poverty, being a poor lone mother. One can also examine the contexts in which they act for these contexts shape their “champs des possibles”, their fields of possible and alternative lines of action - what I call ‘courses of action’. Therefore case histories of families allow the sociologist to focus exactly on the point where social context and individual and family action interact.

Let us start with a definition of family case history.

“A case history of family is made up of narrative accounts of persons belonging to several generations of the same family i.e. a kinship group. They will be asked by the researcher to talk about their own life history and experiences, but also about those of other family members as well, however sketchily; and to comment on their relations with these other members. Family documents may of course complete the data base. The point however is not to focus on one family only, but on a number of them, all members of a common social formation – a society, a sub society, a migration flow- within which their history has been embedded for the last generations. One of the proprieties of cases histories of families is indeed to function as small mirrors of general cultural and social patterns, of societal dynamics and change; and the idea is, by multiplying them, to grasp these patterns and their dynamics of reproduction and historical transformation.”¹

I want to underline a crucial point in this definition. The definition says “ the point is not to focus on one family only, but on a number of them”. What does it mean? I mean that one family case history is not enough to understand a context in which members of this family plan their action, and do what they are doing. For this, you absolutely need several cases: for instance, cases of families in precariousness, families in ethnic businesses or poor lone mothers. But it does not mean that individual family case histories are deprived of sociological content. On the contrary each one is very rich in such content. Indeed, it may be extremely interesting once you have been familiar with a given social world such as ethnic businesses or deprived urban areas. It may be very useful to focuss on one or two families. Following the ethnographic spirit, the deeper you study a case, the more you learn about the effect of social processes that shape the situation and action of members of the family.

¹ Daniel Bertaux and Catherine Delcroix, « Case histories of families and social processes. Enriching sociology”, in Prue Chamberlayne, Joanna Bornat, and Tom Wengraf, *The turn to biographical methods in social sciences*, Routledge, London and New York, 2000

Striking differences in generations, or deep gender differences will emerge under close examination. Also, if you remain in contact over time with one or a few families, you will be able to observe dynamics of interaction between their members and also external dynamics between a family and its context. For example, you may decide also to interview some significant professionals or friends who are connected to the family like a teacher, a doctor, a social worker, etc.

Finally, for the sake of communicating with a public of sociologists and the general public it may be very useful to write a paper or a book about just one family as Oscar Lewis has done or, as I have done myself, to write about one Moroccan family living in France. But before you do that you need to have studied several cases of families in comparable situations, perhaps one, two or three dozen; otherwise the analysis will remain too descriptive.

An example: a comparative European research project: how do urban households in various European cities cope with precarious conditions of life?

The research was done in Lisbon (Portugal), London (Great-Britain), Helsinki (Finland), Umea (Sweden), Toulouse (France), Turin (Italy), Dublin (Ireland).

1. Research topic:

The research topic aimed to describe the kinds of risks and the combination of risks that these households have to face. What kinds of problems do they have to solve in everyday-life and in the course of their lives? What kinds of planning and strategies do they develop, what kinds of resources can they and do they use in doing so? How efficient in helping them are the collective resources that insurance and service welfare systems provide? Given that public policies differ so much among cities, thus creating highly differing contexts and collectively available resources (such as citizenship rights, insurance rights, welfare rights, public/social housing, family policies, urban redistributive policies), which contexts maximise or minimise the risk of households sliding from a precarious situation into one of poverty and eventual exclusion?

We set out in our research bid a precise definition of precariousness or “precarity”. It was derived from a conceptualisation of households as dynamic, open micro-systems of action. The daily re-production of a given household’s way of life (balancing the budget, but also balancing expense of human energy versus the risk of endangering physical and mental equilibrium; balancing time budgets, balancing the tensions within the household so as to prevent its explosion). A household is said to be in a situation of precarity when one or several of its constitutive equilibriums become precarious. Events that perturb balance are losing one’s job, being discriminated at school, falling ill, major problems with a child, a bank’s (unhelpful) reaction to excessive debt, or losing one’s housing. Resources used by households to diminish the effects of such disturbances are: savings, insurance rights (for health problems or unemployment), help from kin, local availability of welfare assistance, living in or moving to better housing or a more secure area.

2. Sketch of the research design:

We used available statistics to describe the urban contexts. We selected seven neighbourhoods in which we interviewed the members of twenty seven households living in precariousness.

Building the sample

We selected twenty seven households within the seven neighbourhoods. All had a common characteristic: at least one person was willing to be interviewed. Of course the aim was to contact not only the mother but also the father and the children (over the age of sixteen). Methodologically it is better to start with parents since you are more likely that way to get access to the children. If you succeed with the parents, the parents will tell their children they should agree to be interviewed. However the contrary is not true. For if you start with a grown up child he or she will not be keen on you talking to his/ her parents.

What kind of criteria did we use to build the sample?

Four variables were critical: income, household composition, employment status, and citizenship.

- A) income: We wanted households with relatively low income. In order to decide on level of income, we identified the median income per unit of consumption in the seven countries. We used the modified Oxford Scale (1 for the breadwinner, 0,5 for the partner, 0,5 for each child over fourteen and, 0,3 for each child under fourteen) and try to interview households where their income corresponded to the “poverty line” - typically defined as half the median income per unit of consumption. We interviewed families who had a quarter median income (this is very low) to those with three quarters.
- B) Household composition: We chose lone-parent households, some with young children (a child under three) and others with grown up children; and two parent households, some with young children, some with grown up children and some with large families (more than three children).
- C) Employment status: Households where the two parents were at work (or perhaps had been working), some where only one worked, and some where none worked currently, but where at least one was available for work and ready to take a job. We included also households where the main breadwinner had been ‘broken’ by work (by an accident, by an illness contracted while working).
- D) Citizenship was relevant for some countries (France, Italy, Portugal, Great Britain, Sweden) and a variety of other statuses and terms such as foreigner, migrant, guest worker and “ethnic minority” (but who is not ethnic of some kind?).

Guidelines for interviewing

To get people to participate in the project, we introduced the research topic as a way of showing how and how much people fight against ‘precarity’. The overall structure of the interview took the form of a “narrative interview” as Shütze defined it. This means that during the first part of the interview you try to get the interviewee to tell her/his story beginning with childhood. This helps in several ways. For instance, the guilt of finding oneself in poverty is minimised when referring to one’s childhood, which was usually “rich” in initial problems and struggles; also it allows the interviewees to make links between now and then. From the research point of view it is very important to get people to talk about their childhood: knowledge of a person’s childhood will help understand how she/he has been produced and structured. To get information about the interviewees’ parents is also useful: who they were, their level of education, their main occupation, their conditions of life, etc.

In the second part of a narrative interview the interviewer asks questions about given themes relevant to the research topic. (This list did not correspond to any chronological order in which the themes should be taken.)

- The juridical situation especially citizenship status (citizen vs foreigner with the right of residence vs foreigner without right of work/residence) and the interviewee's bundle of social rights and entitlements to social help including difficulties in getting access to such rights/entitlements and problems they had because of lack of help or insufficient help).
- Employment status and income: Here we have tried to understand the present situation of the household from the point of view of the situation of the household members who are in the local labour market, and of their strategies regarding employment/work and their conditions of work - health risks, relations at work and how they managed these.

Income

We spoke to them in this way "I would like to understand how you manage, with so little money. This must require much effort and imagination". The people were happy to show how little they had to get by with, how skilled they were in managing such a household in such conditions.

Choices of consumption/life styles

What are their priorities? Getting into debt: what kind of debt and strategies to get out of debt?.

Housing (and home appliances)

How much is the rent and housing debt? What are the risks of being expelled? What projects do they have for moving elsewhere? Opinions about the local neighbourhood; reasons to stay, reasons to move out.

Bringing up children.

What efforts do parents make to encourage their children to internalise norms and codes of behaviour?

What are parents' educational styles? Generally speaking are they authoritarian or liberal? (What they do?) What are their main difficulties and main successes in bringing up children?

Schooling and vocational training.

What are the attitudes/projects of parents (mothers and fathers) towards children succeeding at school and their attitudes to failure? What do they do to prevent failure or promote success? Do they try and meet the teachers for instance?

Health risks.

What are the main health problems and risks? By health we mean both physical and psychological health. Their strategies to avoid getting sick? How were sick members of the family treated by local or city health services?

The use of free time:

What means do they call upon to fight 'precarity' either directly like trade union activism and community action or indirectly – for example sports or cultural activities involving the children?

Family management of crises:

This involves the household division of labour, relations of authority (who decides what) and management of conflicts.

Resistance and mobilisation in collective struggles:

This may mean participation in local action, for example a struggle to get a better playground for children, protests against police harassment of young people.

This kind of family case history shows us the complexity of situations of precarity (for example: scarce monetary resources forcing the household to remain in a neighbourhood which is not safe for children). This complexity has been called the "multidimensionality of poverty" - cf Graham Room. Case studies of households allow us to get detailed descriptions from the people themselves of the problems they have to solve, the risks they have to fight, the resources they can use.

Bringing children into a context of urban poverty. A European comparison of cases from large migrant families in Portugal, France and Sweden.

First, what was common in these three national contexts?

In these different neighbourhoods, we have met migrant parents who explained to us that their children represented everything to them: "*my children are all that I have*", "*my children are everything to me*". Parents talked a great deal about the variety of risks that children were exposed to because of the parents' lack of resources - material, cultural, relational resources - and also because of the densely populated environment in which the children were growing up. Parents showed great awareness of these risks and they used a variety of techniques to prevent their children being attacked by and falling prey to these risks.

Differences between contexts and preventative strategies

By comparing the fate of children in our various neighbourhoods we came to the conclusion that welfare policies explicitly oriented toward children were extremely important in helping parents to build preventative strategies.

Let take three examples:

First in Lisbon, Portugal: Isabel, a thirty-two years old mother of five kids aged from two to fourteen is living with her husband who is from Cap Verde. They live in an illegal house which is in a very bad state and has very few rooms. Both Isabel and her husband have stable jobs. She is a health care assistant in a hospital and her husband is employed as a cleaner by the municipality. Because of the lack of childcare places for her young (under school age)

children Isabel has to sacrifice her older daughters' schooling (aged 13 and 14) who take care of their siblings when Isabel is working. Her husband and herself are trying to accumulate some money to move house and neighbourhood and to enable their daughters to start a professional training as an alternative to regular school. This is a family strategy to avoid expulsion from their illegal housing and to make the children find a solution to avoid complete exclusion. Of course, the children's fate would have been very different if some local nursery was available. Both parents had to work because their salaries were too low (a fact that affects childcare and the type of housing they live in).

In Toulouse, France, a large migrant family benefits from social policies towards youth. However when boys and girls are of age to enter the labour market, they meet racial and class discrimination.

In Umea, Sweden, not only was childcare available but the monitoring of the growth of each child mobilised much of the parents' attention and time. Perhaps because in this context most household's problems were solved more easily than in neighbourhoods in the other countries, the parents were keen that each of their children would develop physically (through participation in sports) and intellectually (parents kept a close watch on school work and were active in parents' associations which controlled what the teachers were doing).

To be trained at school and then to go to university were therefore possibilities - open "champs des possibles" - for children living in large migrant families in France and Sweden but not in Portugal.

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