

# Methodological Issues in Developing a Quantitative Approach to the Study of Family Transactions

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## Introduction

Suzanne Peters' paper, *Examining the Concept of Transactions as the Basis for Studying the Social and Economic Dynamics of Families* (1996), attempts to develop a broad analytical framework inside of which numerous research projects could be conducted in the coming years.

Her rationale for developing such a conceptual approach in family studies stems from a recognition by researchers of the shortcomings of existing theories and of the necessity to adopt a more comprehensive framework, but also, and perhaps more importantly, from the profound and rapid changes that have transformed both the economy and family life. Her main objective, in order to help inform policy decisions, is to explore how the changing and diversified types of families operate in different "domains" and on different "levels", and to investigate in which situations and under which conditions families are better able to develop strategies and to cope with changes. In order to fulfill this objective, she introduces the concept of "transactions", borrowed from economics; the definition is broadened to encompass all "social interactions through which resources are transferred from one person(s) to other(s) to meet needs" (Peters, 1996: 7). The transferred resources are thus not limited to financial and material goods, but also include advice, assistance or caring activities. In her conceptual paper, Peters (1996) recommends adopting an empirical approach in which the definition of families will emerge from the arrays of transactions observed within and across households and from the meanings attached to these by individuals, rather than imposing an "a priori definition". She also argues for the necessity to adopt: a longitudinal approach in order to account for changes over time; a "multiple perspective" to take into account the viewpoints of different family members, thus recognising that families are not "unified wholes"; a linked quantitative-qualitative approach in order to enlighten the meanings that individuals attach to practices; and a multilevel analytic framework that recognises that individuals' actions and meanings are framed and constrained by the characteristics of the situational and systemic levels in which they operate.

Peters' comprehensive framework has been welcomed by family researchers and has proven useful in stimulating the development of new avenues of research (see, for instance, Cheal, 1998; Luxton, 1998; Woolley, 1998). Due to the breath of its scope, however, this framework is raising

important methodological difficulties, both in terms of data collection and data analysis. Some of these difficulties are discussed briefly in the Peters' paper. A qualitative study of *Labour Market Changes and Family Resiliency*, commissioned by the CPRN and conducted in British Columbia in 1996, addresses more directly these issues (Wason and Michalski, 1998). Beyond pursuing the objectives of documenting the key transactions that families make both within and outside of the household and the strategies that they develop to cope with changing employment situations, this study more specifically aims to develop formalised questions for potential use in quantitative surveys and to test the methodology for further research (Wason and Michalski, 1998). The British Columbia study uses an original design combining various data collection techniques (questionnaires, individual interviews, family interviews and focus groups) that proves useful to the analysis of family transactions, but that also raises methodological questions that need to be addressed before launching large quantitative surveys. Many of the reflections that follow stem from the methodological implications raised in this study. Before addressing the latter, however, this paper first briefly presents certain conceptual issues on transactions that have been raised by Cheal, Luxton and Woolley in their papers published in *How Families Cope and Why Policymakers Need to Know*. This detour appears necessary in order to stimulate reflections that go beyond the approach taken by the British Columbia study and that more broadly address issues put forward in the Peters paper.