

Qualitative Research on German Household Practices to Ease the Risk of Poverty

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Abstract : Despite activation policies, forced personal initiative to step out of unemployment and a general prosper economic situation, poverty and financial hardship constitute a crucial role in the daily lives of many families in Germany. In 2015, ~16 million persons (20.2%) of the German population are at risk of poverty or social exclusion. This is illustrated by an unemployment rate of 13.3% in the research area, located in East Germany. Despite this high amount of persons living in vulnerable households, we know little about how they manage to stabilize their lives or even overcome poverty - apart from solely relying on welfare state benefits or entering in a stable, well-paid job. Most of them are struggling in precarious living circumstances, switching from one or several short-term, low-paid jobs into self-employment or unemployment, sometimes accompanied by welfare state benefits. Hence, insecurity and uncertain future expectation form a crucial part of their lives. Within the EU-funded project "RESCuE", resilient practices of vulnerable households were investigated in nine European countries. Approximately, 15 expert interviews with policy makers, representatives from welfare state agencies, NGOs and charity organizations and 25 household interviews have been conducted within each country. It aims to find out more about the chances and conditions of social resilience. The research is based on the triangulation of biographical narrative interviews, followed by participatory photo interviews, asking the household members to portray their typical everyday life. The presentation is focusing on the explanatory strength of this mixed-methods approach in order to show the potential of household practices to overcome financial hardship. The methodological combination allows an in-depth analysis of the families and households everyday living circumstances, including their poverty and employment situation, whether formal and informal. Active household budgeting practices, such as saving and consumption practices are based on subsistence or Do-It-Yourself work. Especially due to the photo-interviews, the importance of inherent cultural and tacit knowledge becomes obvious as it pictures their typical practices, like cultivation and gathering fruits and vegetables or going fishing. One of the central findings is the multiple purposes of these practices. They contribute to ease financial burden through consumption reduction and strengthen social ties, as they are mostly conducted with close friends or family members. In general, non-commodified practices are found to be re-commodified and to contribute to ease financial hardship, e.g. by the use of commons, barter trade or simple mutual exchange (gift exchange). These practices can substitute external purchases and reduce expenses or even generate a small income. Mixing different income sources are found to be the most likely way out of poverty within the context of a precarious labor market. But these resilient household practices take its toll as they are highly preconditioned, and many persons put themselves into risk of overstressing themselves. Thus, the potentials and risks of resilient household practices are reflected in the presentation.

Keywords : consumption practices, labor market, qualitative research, resilience

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