INTRODUCTION

I want to begin by recognizing the possible tensions between an analysis which starts from a gender perspective and one which begins with the household. Both perspectives have been important in the development of current sociological analysis and both perspectives have themselves undergone change. Recognition of possible tensions between the two perspectives has been present for some time (Stanley, 1992a; Arber, 1993; Anderson, Bechofer and Gershuny, 1994; Morgan, 1996) and this chapter aims to outline the bases of this tension and possible ways of going beyond it. At the simplest level it could be argued that gender represents a mode of classifying individuals (as when an array of data is broken down by sex) while households refer to some form of collectivity. Hence, there is always the danger that gender differences will be subsumed under an analysis which takes the household as the level of analysis. This simple methodological point takes on greater significance when it is argued that gender is not simply a matter of difference but is also a question of inequality (Evans, 1995; Morgan, 1996). Here, as Anderson et al. (1994) recognize, a household-based analysis may ignore differences in terms of power. This becomes especially important when, for example, reference is made to ‘household strategies’, an analysis of outcomes that may obscure the deployment of gendered power likely to produce such outcomes (Edwards and Ribbens, 1991; Wallace, 1993). In practice, however, this possibility of a tension between household- and gender-based approaches may possibly prove to be more fruitful than harmful. It can be recognized that both represent possible points of departure, thus retaining some of the gains in understanding that have been provided by an approach based upon households, while not losing sight of a gendered approach which sees gender in terms of both difference and inequality. Such a recognition will, it is hoped, further the gains made by both approaches. If, generally speaking, much household analysis has managed to avoid the dangers
recognized by Anderson et al. (1994), a large part of the credit must go to feminist scholarship which, from the outset, highlighted gendered divisions within households. We may cite the work of the ‘Resources within Households’ group (Brannen and Wilson, 1987), work by Lydia Morris (1990) and Jan Pahl (1989) and briefer statements by Arber (1993) and Stanley (1992a). These analyses helped to ensure that the black-box of the household would remain partially open, that issues of power differentials would remain on the agenda and that the dangers of reification were correspondingly reduced.

There is little need at this point to go beyond listing the various ways in which gendered understandings of the household influenced research and theorizing. A major focus, of course, was upon divisions of labour between men and women within households, divisions in terms of the amount of domestic labour performed, the actual nature of the tasks performed and the way in which these shaped and drew upon commonsensical notions of male and female identities (Morris, 1990; Seymour, 1988). A major line of questioning here was around the extent to which there had been any significant shifts in terms of men’s participation in domestic tasks. Other work focused upon the allocation and use of resources within the household, beginning with money but extending to consider issues to do with food, time and space (Charles and Kerr, 1988; Pahl, 1989; DeVault, 1991). There were also overlaps here with the developing analysis around the concept of care, the extent and the ways in which this was gendered and the various practices associated with informal care (especially of the elderly) within and between households (Finch and Groves, 1980; Stacey, 1981; Ungerson, 1990; Graham, 1991; Finch, 1994). An interesting illustration of a parallel development in both the analysis of household and the analysis of gender around the issue of care is provided by Hilary Graham (1991). While recognizing the strength of a feminist approach which highlighted gender as a major dimension in the analysis of care, she also recognizes the limitations of a series of studies which concentrated on unpaid care by relatives, which saw gender as the central social division, ignoring other divisions such as race and class. Her case study, focusing upon paid domestic service, not only introduces these other inequalities into the analysis but also calls into question conventional notions of a strongly bounded household. Domestic servants are both within and outside particular households to varying degrees.

Much of this work is still continuing and needs to continue. However, it can be reasonably maintained that, in Britain at least, there are few household-based analyses which do not take on board some kind of recognition of gendered differences and inequalities. A partial exception, here, may