



Counting Couples, Counting Families



Assessment of Data on Family Ties Across Households

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Family relationships are complicated. They are complicated in real life, and they are complicated for researchers and policy makers who want to understand the experiences of family members by asking them questions that make sense to them. Some parents, usually fathers, and young children live apart; some mothers have children with different fathers, and some fathers have children with different mothers in what we so un-melifluously call “multi-partner fertility.” Children also have ties to adults who may become social parents, as when a biological parent cohabits or remarries, or even has a serious relationship with someone with whom they are not living – a Living Apart Together (LAT) relationship, more commonly discussed in Europe than in the United States. The potential proliferation of family relationships occurs for all generations, affecting grandparents who separate and repartner as well as parents and children.

Despite the growing complexity of U.S. families, data on ties between family members who live apart have improved greatly in the past couple of decades. These improvements have occurred in federal surveys (the Current Population Survey, National Survey of Family Growth) as well as selected researcher initiated surveys supported by federal funds (Fragile Families, Add Health). The compendia of questions developed by the NCFMR illustrate multiple dimensions of relationships that we can now study using federal or federally-supported data sources. The emphasis in the compendia is on the parent-minor child relationship and that is what I emphasize in my comments as well.¹ The NCFMR lists include measures of time that parents or parent figures spend with children when they do not live in the same households, residence histories to identify whether or not a parent and child ever lived together, the types of activities nonresident parents and children pursue with each other, financial and in-kind transfers, and legal arrangements governing the relationships between parents and minor children.

These data help us address three broad questions:

1. Who helps a family member who is not living with them?
2. How is this help associated with the well-being of those who give help and those who receive it? This question is especially important when we ask about how children are affected by help from parents and grandparents outside the household.
3. How do legal arrangements, such as custody and paternity establishment, child support orders, and visitation agreements affect relationships between parents and children who live apart?

¹There are rich survey data on adult family ties across households in studies like the Health and Retirement Study, and increasingly in the Panel Study of Income Dynamics. These and other major surveys have great potential for improved data on inter-household family ties in middle and old age. See Bianchi et al. (2007) for an assessment of data on intergenerational relationships.

It is important to articulate the questions so that we can determine what data are available to address these questions. I use a demographer's lens to evaluate the data, focusing on the population at risk, the populations to which we seek to generalize findings about effects of inter-household family ties, and the importance of family members' geographic location. I also consider four issues to which we must attend to improve data on inter-household family ties: 1) technological change in how family members can maintain ties when they do not live together; 2) how multi-partner fertility makes it more difficult to collect data on inter-household ties; 3) increases in "doubling up" or parents and adult children living together; and, 4) the aging of cohorts who experienced high rates of divorce, nonmarital childbearing, and cohabitation.

What is the population?

Kin availability. Researchers must observe both those who help nonresident kin *and* those who do not help to determine what social or policy variables cause family members to help each other. For this question it is not enough to know only who helps. Knowing which fathers pay child support does not allow us to answer the question: What causes fathers to pay child support because we do not know which men are nonresident fathers. To predict who helps we first need to know who is at risk. Is the man a father? Does he have a minor child who does not live with him? Then, does he pay child support? The Consumer Expenditure (CE) Survey, for example, asks if anyone paid child support, but these data cannot be used to investigate why some fathers pay and others do not because the data do not identify nonresident fathers. Without knowing who is a nonresident father, it is impossible to distinguish those who have no children from those who do not pay support. Similarly to know why some adult children help their older parents when they become infirm, we need to know whose parents are still alive (i.e., the population of children at risk to providing care) and then, whether or not they provide care. The Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) asks about unpaid help provided to parents (among others). Without knowing who has an older parent, researchers cannot distinguish between those who choose not to help a parent and those who are not at risk, that is those who help no one because they have no one to help.² A way to keep track of what kin are available in a child's family is the NLSY 97 Non-Resident Roster, which lists family members who are not in the youth's household. Unique IDs assigned by the NLSY97 staff also can be used to determine if youths later share a household with any of these family members.

Are we studying children, fathers, or mothers? We have an embarrassment of riches: birth cohort studies, cross-sectional surveys of parents who report about one or more children, and cross-

² I focus on the demographic definition of the population, that is, whether or not someone has a living parent, and not the harder problem of determining whether or not the parent "needs" help. Needing help is a combination of objective circumstances and subjective evaluation of need. Ideally surveys would include both the availability of kin (i.e., whether or not they are still alive; whether there are stepparents, etc.) and their needs and resources. This is a tall order. It is more feasible to address this data requirement in studies with a genealogical design, such as the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, which follows multiple family members over time, and in topical modules for ongoing studies.

sectional studies of children. These designs can tell us different things. Birth cohort studies, such as the Fragile Families, Early Childhood Longitudinal Surveys, the NLSYs, and Add Health, can provide in-depth information about how family relationships change over time as children grow up and parents – and the children themselves – move in and out of shared households. These children all start off with the same initial conditions as others in the sample in the sense that they start school at roughly the same time, and they are subject to the same broad economic, social, and political environments. However, they live in different U.S. states, so they are exposed to different family policies. Policy variation can be used to model variation in responses to policies about such things as child support and custody laws that affect nonresident parent-child relationships. Birth cohort studies *cannot* provide a snapshot view of the welfare of U.S. children, what percentage have ties to nonresident parents, and how much child support all nonresident parents pay or resident parents receive. The Current Population Survey Child Support Supplements (CPS-CSS) can provide this information. There is a trade-off between following cohorts over time and cross-sectional data like those from the CPS-CSS) that provide broad coverage but at the expense of knowing what the effects are of child support payments or custody.

Birth cohort studies are by definition samples of *children* born in a particular time period. Parents may be interviewed to describe themselves and to give information about their children, but these parents are themselves characteristics of the sample child in the study design. The parents are not a sample of all parents or even all parents of a child-support eligible child. Studies like the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) which sample adults in their reproductive years can be used as samples of parents, some of whom live with their children and some of whom do not. The NSFG's extension to include men as well as women in the sample makes this a valuable new source of information about ties between parents and children who live apart. Here again, though, we must be careful to recognize the restriction on the population of parents. These are parents 15 to 44 years old. The upper age limit of 44 means that experiences of older parents are either truncated or excluded entirely. As a result, the NSFG data under-represent remarriages and later cohabitations. This is more than an accounting problem. It is a problem for studying the association between repartnering and nonresident parent-child relationships, something that matters for children's well-being. Extending the age range of the NSFG sample would make it an even more valuable data source for studies of inter-household ties from parents' perspectives.

The parallel samples of the NSFG are also useful for describing differences in inter-household family ties from both mothers' and fathers' perspectives. Yet it is important to keep in mind that the fathers of children who are reported by the women in the NSFG sample are not necessarily represented in the sample of fathers in the male NSFG sample.³ Women typically partner with men who are slightly older than they are, but the NSFG sample ages are the same for the parallel samples of women and

³ I ignore potential reporting differences between mothers and fathers, although there is evidence that men's reports about family relationships are not as good as women's. Bloom (1998) states that men's reports of their marriages are incomplete, and that women's reports appear to be complete. He cites a 1984 unpublished manuscript by A. Pendleton, J. McCarthy, A. Cherlin, "Assessing the Quality of Retrospective Marriage Histories: The June 1980 Current Population Survey." Cherlin, Griffith and McCarthy (1983) also find that men underreport their children born in previous relationships.

men. This is not a design flaw, but it is something to keep in mind when we compare mothers' and fathers' experiences and they do not match.

Do we want to know about biological parents or parent figures? To address questions about what makes some children turn out well and some children turn out poorly requires information about all of their parents, as well as other aspects of children's environment. Biological parents' health and resources give children a start in life. They are also genetically tied, and the combination of genetic and social ties may have lasting consequences for children's health and well-being. In some families it is straightforward to learn about children's biological parents' characteristics because both parents live in the same household as the child. When the child grows up and leaves home, that child is still a reasonably good source of information about both biological parents. In other families it is more difficult because one or both biological parents are not in the household. Other adults, stepparents, a parent's cohabiting partner, and grandparents, may act as parents, spending time with children, sharing resources with them, and influencing their development. The proliferation of parents makes it challenging for surveys to obtain information about each of a child's parents, whether the child is still young or is an adult living independently. Yet information about both biological and stepparent parents is necessary to understand the potential resources available to children and the potential need to provide care to parents late in life. Nonresident fathers and stepparents may be particularly disadvantaged in later life if they need care from adult children (Lin 2008; Pezzin et al. 2008). Many increasingly important research questions about intergenerational transmission of health and transfers require basic information about biological parents – whether or not they are alive, where they live, and their health and economic circumstances – even if the child feels closer to a stepparent or other parent-figure than to a biological parent. This concern with both types of parents, biological and social, is a variant of my point about the need to know the availability of kin to be able to determine why some people give or receive help and others do not.

Where is everyone?

Geography and policy. Many of the laws and policies governing relationships between parents and minor children are made at the state level. Thus knowing where parents and minor children live is valuable information needed to determine what policies might affect their relationships. This is most critical for studies of nonresident parent-child relationships, child support, visitation, custody, and some aspects of health coverage, but it is also important for studies of adoption. The CPS-CSS question about whether the nonresident parent lives in the same state as the resident parent is helpful on this point. As I have already mentioned, birth cohort studies in which geographic data are available on the child's location also indicate the policy environment so that researchers can exploit differences in policies as an instrument for identifying effects of such things as child support payments on how involved nonresident parents are in their children's lives and the effects on children of fathers' involvement.

Proximity and caregiving, but how close is close? Geographic proximity also affects the ability to provide child care or to help an older parent with errands and housekeeping. There is great variation in how proximity is measured in large surveys. Some ask respondents to report distance in miles, others

ask about travel time. The response categories vary across surveys so that it is difficult to compare measures of proximity even when the questions use the same metric. Geographic coordinates provide the most information by linking a family member to a legal, economic, and physical environment, but these data are identifying and should only be available with appropriate data security. Most surveys do not include the specific geographic location of multiple (non-co-residing) family members. The Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) is a rare exception. For the few studies, like the Health and Retirement Study (HRS), that have both geographic locations of parents and children and proxy reports from parents about how far away each child lives, it would be helpful to know how well respondents report about geographic proximity by comparing specific geographic locations to survey responses about proximity. Better data on geographic location and on proximity would enhance researchers' ability to investigate how policies affect family ties and how decisions about where to live affect caregiving.

Co-residence and Household Rosters

Household based sampling is a basic tool of family demography. Demographers, for the most part, do a good job of describing relationships between parents and children who live together.⁴ One reason *Counting Couples* is having a session on family ties across households is that we recognize the importance of family members who do not live in the same household. My characterization – that we do a good job of studying parents and children who live together – is a little simplistic. It ignores the variation across surveys in the rules used to determine who is a household resident and who is not. Data collectors and respondents may have very different definitions of who lives in a particular household. In fact, the 2000 census has an overcount of children around age 10 which analysts attribute to joint custody situations in which both of a child's parents report that the child lived with them (Cork and Voss 2006).

Getting residence right is important for two practical aspects of data on inter-household ties. First, it links individuals to geography which is essential for policy-related analyses. Second, it guides respondents through question sequences that treat family members who live together differently than family members who live apart. The clearest example of this is that a single parent who lives with a minor child is asked about *receiving* child support and in-kind transfers from the child's nonresident parent. A parent who reports that a minor child lives elsewhere is asked about *giving* child support and transfers. These questions make sense to many, perhaps most, families, but in cases where children spend substantial time in each parents' homes the questions are hard to answer (Lin et al. 2004). Questions about whether youths at the transition to adulthood are living in their parents' household or have "left home" also ask respondents to describe a situation that can be ambiguous because youths may spend most of their time away but still be economically dependent on parents. Surveys should

⁴ An exception is measuring transfers among co-residing family members in ways that allow comparisons to transfers among family members who do not co-reside. There is limited availability of comparable measures for household and nonhousehold members (Bianchi et al., 2008).

have clear rules for interviewers and respondents about what “living here” means, and communicate the rules in a way that makes sense to respondents. Researchers should pay attention to these rules.

Potential Family Ties vs. Actual Family Ties

Most surveys ask questions about actual ties between family members who live apart. Do they spend time together? Talk about important things? Help each other with practical aspects of life? Give each other money? These things are all part of being a family. Another part of being a family is knowing that there is a safety net of family members who will help in an emergency or who could bail you out if you take a risk and things turn out badly. Few datasets ask questions about this kind of potential help, but it is a concept that is important in both economic and sociological theories about intergenerational relationships (Wong 2008). Knowing whether or not a person can count on nonresident family members and knowing whether or not these family members think they are responsible for that person would provide new insight on why individuals make the family and employment choices they do and what difference these choices make for their well-being. Questions of this type could be added as a module in an ongoing survey such as the Add Health or NLSY97 to enhance the rich behavioral data these studies already collect.

Looking to the Future

Four changes pose challenges for data collection on inter-household family ties. First, new technology has altered the way we keep in touch. People rarely send letters to keep in touch. Texting, IMs, email, and other new technologies I am not savvy enough to use are types of contact that many of our existing surveys do not include when we ask whether or not a parent or child has been in contact. We do not need separate questions about each mode, but we do need to broaden the coverage of examples in questions about contact. We should also consider whether or not these new modes change the content or effect of keeping in touch, for instance keeping in close touch (or perhaps too close, as in helicopter parenting) with young adult children who are in college or providing emotional support to an older parent who has been widowed recently.

A second challenge is that multi-partner fertility means that parents may have more than one set of children to report about in our surveys. Dykema and Schaeffer (2000) find that the quality of reports about child support diminishes the more children parents have. Although the parents they studied were reporting about children in one family (i.e., one mother, one father), their results suggest that the quality of reports about financial transfers may be worse when there are multiple sets of children. There is a need for off-line studies of the quality of data provided by members of more complicated families, compared to the data provided by members of less complicated families. If improvements in measurement are needed, they would enhance knowledge about how families with multiple sets of children function.

The third change that may increase the difficulty of measuring inter-household family ties is caused by the increase in co-residence associated with the current economic crisis (Mykyta and

Macartney 2011). As intergenerational households become more common, potential respondents may experience living arrangements that are more difficult to describe using standard household enumeration methods. Young adults who take longer to leave the parental home or are more likely to return due to economic hardship may make it more difficult for parents and adult children to describe who lives in the household. This response difficulty has downstream implications for the quality of data from question sequences about transfers that condition on whether or not a person is in the household.

Finally, data collectors interested in family ties across households should attend to a fourth change – the aging of cohorts whose lives have been affected by high rates of divorce, nonmarital childbearing, and cohabitation. Family researchers know little about later life relationships between adult children and “absent” parents, stepparents, and quasi-parents acquired through cohabitation. Even the terminology for some of these relationships is difficult. HRS respondents, for example, sometimes describe children as “former stepchildren” but this relationship is not a standard concept in “real life” or a relationship code in most surveys. The challenge of describing what kin are available is only a first step. Because family members are the primary source of informal care for the elderly population, most of whom live independently, data on the need for care and on who has the resources to provide it will shed light on an important, policy-relevant problem. Because retirement-age spouses and cohabiting partners are increasingly likely to have children from previous relationships, it is important for surveys to include questions that do a better job of identifying both partners’ children as well as their shared children. Biological parents are likely to report more accurately about their children’s characteristics than stepparents who may not have lived with the children. This points to the need to develop creative ways to obtain information from both members of a couple without unduly burdening respondents. Another reason to ask both spouses/partners about family relationships outside the household is that gender differences in family ties may diverge in later life due to differences in mothers’ and fathers’ time with young children after divorce or a nonunion birth and differences in whether or not the parent becomes a residential stepparent. The aging of individuals with complicated family ties will create new challenges for demographic researchers and for policy makers who rely on the data we collect.

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