



Counting Couples, Counting Families



Counting Couples: Marriage, Remarriage, and the Significance of Basic Questions

Megan M. Sweeney
University of California, Los Angeles

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Counting Couples: Marriage, Remarriage, and the Significance of Basic Questions*

Megan M. Sweeney
Department of Sociology
University of California, Los Angeles
264 Haines Hall
Los Angeles, CA 90095
(310) 206-7290
Msweeney@soc.ucla.edu

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In her contribution to an edited volume emerging from the last Counting Couples conference, Christine Bachrach (2007) emphasized the importance of basic questions: What are we trying to measure and why? With respect to marriage and remarriage, two aspects of family life in the early 21st century increase the salience of these questions. First, in an era when the majority of marriages begin as cohabiting unions and a substantial share of marriages do not last a lifetime, is it still important to study legal marriage and to do so in a way that distinguishes marriage from other forms of intimate partnership? Is it important to distinguish first marriages from higher-order marriages? Second, how is marital status best measured in the context of increasing availability of marriage to same-sex couples? In this brief review, I motivate attention to the study of legal marriage and remarriage and consider the changing array of federal data to conduct this important work, paying particular attention to data available to study same-sex marriages.¹

Why study marriage and remarriage?

Although intimate partnerships increasingly exist outside the confines of legal marriage, marriage clearly still warrants study as a distinct relationship type. Marriage is associated with relatively better health and economic well-being than nonmarital cohabitation both for adults and children (e.g., Morrison & Ritualo 2000; Rendall et al. 2011), although mechanisms underlying these associations remain insufficiently understood. More so than other relationship forms, marriage is associated with widely-shared expectations about formal and informal social interactions, roles and obligations, and long-run commitment (Raley & Sweeney 2009). Although rates of marital instability are high, marriage remains considerably more enduring, on average, than other relationship types (Bumpass & Raley 2007). Finally, beyond the social and emotional significance of marriage, it also is important to keep in mind that marriage confers a specific set of legal and economic rights and responsibilities (American Bar Association Section of Family Law 2004).

We know considerably less about remarriage than first marriage, although remarriage remains an important area of study for a number of reasons. For example, remarriage is associated with weaker economic, social, and health benefits than first marriage (Carr & Springer 2010; Sweeney 2010), although the reasons for these differences are again not fully understood. The wisdom of encouraging marriage among single mothers has been a topic of considerable debate in both scholarly and policy circles (Brown 2010). In practice these unions often involve a remarriage rather than a first marriage, motivating a separate consideration of processes associated with the formation and stability of marital unions of each type. Unlike first marriage transitions, which tend to be concentrated in early adulthood,

¹ Other important topics, such as the availability of data to jointly study fertility and marital histories, lie beyond the scope of this brief review. Although a number of sample surveys are available that include some coverage of marriage or remarriage (e.g., NLS79, NLS97, Add Health), my focus here is on the largest of the federally funded surveys which are intended to be representative of the broad U.S. population: the American Community Survey (ACS), Current Population Survey (CPS), National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), and the U.S. Decennial Census. Basic information on question wording in other available surveys can be found at <http://ncfmr.bgsu.edu/pdf/questioncrosswalk/Marriage%20and%20Remarriage/file96178.pdf>.

remarriage transitions are distributed more broadly throughout the life course, thus providing opportunities to understand how the context of marriage varies with age. Remarriage also offers strategic opportunities to study how marital transitions are affected by the broader contexts of social and kin relationships, economic resources, and labor market trajectories (for further discussion, see Sweeney 2010).

The Changing Landscape of Federal Data on Marriage and Remarriage

The landscape of federal data available to monitor basic trends and differentials in patterns of marriage and remarriage has changed considerably in recent decades. In December 1995, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced that it would no longer collect and publish detailed data on marriage and divorce from vital statistics. While acknowledging that this would represent a loss of data to researchers interested in monitoring trends and differentials in marriage, divorce, and remarriage, the agency noted that much of this information was available from the June Marital History Supplement of the Current Population Survey (CPS). Yet the CPS Marital History Supplement was itself discontinued after 1995. These losses followed on the heels of the discontinuation of the age at first marriage question in the U.S. Census in 1990.

Large sample sizes are required to reliably monitor marriage and remarriage trends for relatively small subpopulations, such as within specific racial or ethnic groups, immigrant populations, and among individuals in same-sex partnerships. Reliable estimates of how marriage and remarriage trends vary across states or other local contexts are also needed to understand how family policy influences marriage behavior, as it is predominately state law that governs conditions of marriage formation and dissolution and determines the rights and obligations of spouses (Ooms, Bouchet, & Parke 2004). To appropriately monitor trends and differentials in marriage, information on current marital status at the time of the survey is needed, as is some basic information on marital history in order to identify marriage order and to estimate rates of marriage and remarriage. A growing body of work highlights the importance of studying full relationship careers, including evidence that cumulative family structure instability is associated with poor youth well-being (e.g., Bulanda & Manning 2008; Fomby & Cherlin 2007). While it is important to study transitions involving the formation and dissolution of legal marriages, most family scholars would agree that this information is most useful when considered in the context of more complete relationship histories, including also experiences of nonmarital cohabitation.

The ACS and SIPP are two important data sources broadly representative of the U.S. population and well-designed to study marriage and remarriage. The utility of the ACS for studying marriage was greatly improved beginning in 2008, when limited information on marital history was added to the survey (number of times married, year at last marriage, experience of marriage / widowhood / divorce in the past 12 months). Notable strengths of the ACS include large sample sizes and the ability to generate reliable estimates at the state level. The sampling design of the ACS also includes coverage of institutionalized populations, which is essential to document and explain patterns of marriage and remarriage among subgroups with relatively high rates of incarceration or military services. These features make the ACS an extremely valuable data resource for policymakers and family scholars. Yet the ACS remains limited in a number of respects for the study of marriage and remarriage. These data provide only limited information about marital careers or potential determinants of marital transitions for individuals. For example, age at first marriage – a key demographic variable – is directly available

only for individuals married one time in the ACS. In addition, the array of other information about respondents which is needed to develop theoretical understanding of the determinants of marital transitions remains limited in these data, and no information is gathered on past histories of nonmarital cohabitation. Unlike the ACS, SIPP is not designed to produce annual state-level estimates of marriage and remarriage, but sample sizes are relatively large and SIPP contains more detailed information on marital histories than does the ACS. Like the ACS, however, it is not possible to study marital transitions in the context of broader relationship careers, including histories of non-marital cohabitation.

The National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) contains smaller sample sizes than either the ACS or SIPP, but includes detailed marital and cohabitation histories. Sample sizes can potentially be increased by pooling multiple rounds of the survey. The NSFG also includes a reasonably large number of potential correlates of marital transitions, and more extensive information on the characteristics of spouses. Data were collected from men as well as women beginning in 2002. A major limitation of these data, however, is the age-based sampling design, which includes only respondents age 15-44. This particularly limits the usefulness of these data for the study of remarriage. Again, as remarriage ages are distributed widely throughout the adult life course, this age truncation renders the NSFG of more limited use to study remarriage formation and stability in the full population of interest (see also Bumpass & Raley 2007). Datasets specifically focusing on older age groups, such as the Health and Retirement Survey (HRS), can help fill this gap, although piecing together data from multiple studies to gain understanding of how marriage and remarriage vary over the life course can be complicated by differences in sampling designs and question wording across individual studies.

The Measurement of Same-Sex Marriages

Growth in the availability of legal marriage to same-sex couples through changing legislation in individual states² has outpaced the development of appropriate procedures to count these couples. The relatively small population of same-sex married couples makes large sample sizes extremely important in datasets used to study this group. I thus focus my discussion here on data from the U.S. Census and the ACS.

Federal agencies have routinely edited raw data in ways that affect counts of same-sex partners and spouses. These editing procedures are complicated and have changed substantially over a short time span. Sometimes “corrections” erroneously inflated counts of same-sex couples, such as the pre-2007 ACS procedure of routinely recoding cases where respondents marked both male and female in response to the gender item, or marked multiple responses to the relationship items, to the first category marked (e.g., “male” or “husband / wife”) (O’Connell et al., 2010).³ A number of recent studies indicate that the misclassification different-sex couples seriously distorted estimates of total numbers of

² At time of this writing, same-sex couples can become legally married in Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, and the District of Columbia. New York’s newly-signed law legalizing marriage for same-sex couples is expected to take effect in late July 2011.

³ As evidence of this, O’Connell and colleagues (2010) note that a greater share of same-sex couples were male (the first response option listed) in the ACS between 2005-2007, but in 2008 a greater share were female after procedures for processing multiple marked responses were revised.

same-sex couples in the 2000 Census, although estimates of the magnitude of this bias vary considerably across studies (e.g., Black et al. 2007; O’Connell & Gooding 2007; Gates & Steinberger 2011). Procedures were refined in the ACS beginning in 2007, for example with cases of multiple responses instead inspected for likely error (e.g., evidence of intended erasure or cross-outs) and remaining cases of multiple marks treated as blank responses (O’Connell et al., 2010). Similar procedures were planned for the 2010 Census (O’Connell et al. 2010). In both the 2000 Census and the ACS, the “husband / wife” relationship designation was changed to “unmarried partner” in publicly-released data when respondents reported having a same-sex spouse (O’Connell & Gooding 2006; O’Connell et al. 2010).⁴ Although the Census Bureau plans to release aggregate tabulations of same-sex spouses from the 2010 Census, specific plans for releasing individual-level microdata on same-sex spouses remain unclear (Gary Gates, personal communication, July 2011).

Counts of same-sex spouses may also be inaccurate in federal data for other reasons. For example, fears of stigma or discrimination may make some same-sex couples (married or unmarried) hesitant to identify themselves as such on federal surveys. In one recent study, Gates (2010) finds that 10% of individuals cohabiting with a same-sex partner recalled having described their relationship as roommates or other non-relatives on the Census 2010 form. Most commonly cited reasons for this included thinking of their relationship in some other way, confidentiality concerns, or dissatisfaction with the relationship choice options presented to them. These findings suggest that additional outreach specifically targeting privacy concerns may improve measurement of same-sex partners and spouses, but also indicate that additional exploratory work is needed to determine how best to measure both legal relationship status and to capture the set of response categories that best reflect how gay and lesbian individuals think about their relationships. Moreover, married same-sex spouses may be unclear as to whether “husband / wife” is the appropriate response category on a federal survey given that these marriages are not recognized by the federal government and may not be recognized by their state of residence (Gates 2010). Indeed, in Gates’s (2010) study, sample members who said they were legally married but had reported living with their unmarried partner on the Census 2010 form almost universally (94%) attributed this omission to the fact that their marriage was not recognized by the federal or state government. Legally married respondents were also far more likely to report themselves as such on the Census 2010 form if they lived in a state that legally recognized same sex marriage than if they lived in a state which did not (89 vs. 62%, respectively).

Clearly researchers aren’t the only ones grappling with the question of what we should be trying to measure with respect to marital status. Indeed, Census 2010 explicitly put this difficult task of conceptualization squarely on the shoulders of individual respondents when advising LGBT community leaders: “Census data are based on how individuals self identify and how couples think of themselves. Same-sex couples who are married, *or consider themselves to be spouses* [emphasis added], can identify one other adult as ‘husband or wife.’ ”⁵ This approach likely produced variability in the definition of “husband or wife” applied by individual respondents and does not capture the fact that marriage is a privileged legal relationship conveying specific rights and responsibilities. It may well be that considering

⁴ Gates and Steinberger (2011), however, identify important differences between the Census and ACS in treatment of reports of same-sex spouses among initial mail non-respondents.

⁵ Source: http://2010.census.gov/partners/pdf/factSheet_General_LGBT.pdf, downloaded on July 7, 2011.

oneself to be married is indeed what we want to measure with relationship status questions on federal surveys such as the Census, particularly for individuals who do not have access to legal marriage in their state of residence. Or not. This is a decision that requires more thought and discussion among scholars and policymakers, and should take into account our motivation(s) for counting same-sex spouses in the first place.

Discussion and Recommendations

A number of points emerge from the preceding discussion. First, it remains important to monitor and to explain trends and differentials in patterns of marriage and remarriage. Such work will be most effective and useful to policymakers and scholars when data are available which, at minimum, include large sample sizes, can produce estimates at the state / local level, and which include information on marital and other key types of relationship histories (e.g., nonmarital cohabitation) as well as information on the likely correlates of these relationship transitions. Our era of constrained resources may reasonably require trade-offs between breadth and depth, and it may not be feasible to fulfill all of these needs in a single data source (e.g., ACS). But some changes to the existing menu of federal data options seem worth serious consideration. For example, needs of researchers and policymakers may justify the addition of cohabitation histories to the SIPP. It may make sense to consider modifying the upper age limit of the NSFG. Finally, the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) was analyzed extensively by family demographers and provided tremendous insights into patterns of marriage and remarriage throughout the life course. The full NSFH sample was last interviewed more than 15 years ago,⁶ and marriage patterns are known to have changed in more recent years. It seems high time to consider dedicating resources to another study of marriage and family patterns that is broadly representative of the U.S. population and spans the full life course.

This review of federal data available to study same-sex marriage highlights the importance of clarifying our primary motivations for monitoring trends in same-sex marriage. Do these motivations suggest that we should be interested in measuring legally-defined marriages, legally-recognized relationships of any type (e.g., including registered domestic partnerships and civil unions), or whether people “feel” married? If legal status is of particular interest, then it also seems important to locate individuals within states or other local contexts of residence to determine the extent to which a marriage between same-sex spouses practically confers the set of legal rights and responsibilities afforded different-sex spouses. Once researchers and policymakers have agreed on exactly what we are trying to measure in the case of same-sex marriage, we should more clearly convey this intended meaning to our survey respondents. Finally, more consideration is needed of the best ways to gather and process data on marital status to accurately count same-sex spouses and partners, including empirical evaluations of the ways in which question wording and data processing procedures influence the validity of final counts. A number of recent analyses offer excellent examples of this type of work (e.g., Gates 2010; O’Connell et al. 2010). Greater transparency is also needed about editing procedures employed before making raw data available for public release and researchers should be given access to microdata in its original unedited form whenever feasible.

⁶ The NSFH sample was interviewed in 1987 and 1992-94. A select subset of respondents, selected partially based on age, was also re-interviewed in 2001.

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