



# Counting Couples, Counting Families



## Family Ties Across Households

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Parents living in separate residences constitute a major source of interhousehold exchange. In 2002, 23% of all children were living with only their mothers (Fields, 2003) and child support collections amounted to 25 billion dollars (Grall, 2007; Hofferth, Pleck, Stueve, Bianchi & Sayer, 2002) alone, as well as countless messages exchanged by phone, e-mail, and now, Facebook. Financial supports from nonresidential fathers are important to the future success of children in school, as child support has been shown to increase GPA and scholastic achievement and to reduce behavior problems (Argys, Peters, Brooks-Gunn & Smith, 1998; Baydar & Brooks-Gunn, 1994; King, 1994; King, 1994; McLanahan, Seltzer, Hanson & Thomson, 1994). Other than child support, we know little about sharing of resources across households. Knowledge about sharing within households is practically nonexistent. With some exceptions, research assumes sharing of resources with children and spouses, though research has shown that the men allocate resources differently from women.

In this brief presentation, I describe both what we know and what is important to know about these exchanges, what is currently collected, and what types of information we need to collect. I want to focus on three types of intergenerational exchange: 1) support by nonresidential parents to their minor children – financial support, contact, and involvement; 2) support parents provide as children transition out of the home, including financial support while they complete their schooling, coresidence, and subsidies for the transition to self-sufficiency as they leave home to form their own families; and 3) support by children to aging parents. I'll focus more attention on the first and then discuss what is needed for the others. I will also talk not about “parents” in general but make sure that we talk about the exchanges of fathers and mothers as individuals with each other and with their children. I refer to papers on secondary data analysis (Hofferth, 2005); two papers on child support, father involvement, and child health

(Hofferth, Forry & Peters, 2010; Hofferth & Pinzon, 2011); and to the previous edited volume entitled *Handbook of Measurement Issues in Family Research* that resulted from the second Counting Couples conference (Hofferth & Casper, 2007).

### **Why Linkages Matter and Why We Cannot Study them at Present**

In determining family behavior and decisions, we are missing a critical element – the potential contributions of nonhousehold family members. The potential availability of support from family permits individuals to select options that they otherwise would be unable to afford. However, even though families cross household boundaries, obtaining information on these exchanges has been rare, though it is remarkably available in some of the newer surveys (NLS-97, for example). We are still generally missing information on the household of the nonresidential family members with whom exchanges occur. For example, in studying provision of child support, it would be helpful to know whether the nonresidential parent started a new family. It would also be helpful to know how well-off that household is. We do not currently obtain information about nonhousehold individuals other than nonresidential parents. Intrahousehold exchanges are also missed; in general, except for child care expenses (which are well covered), we have not known how much time/money fathers and mothers provide their children, but this is beginning to be addressed through the Consumer Expenditure Survey, the American Time Use Survey, and other data projects that collect information about parental expenditures of time and money on children.

### **Nonresidential Parents and Support for Children**

Nonresidential parents could be mothers or fathers, but are disproportionately fathers, because young children tend to reside with their mothers. Under this domain are three types of

exchange: financial support, contact, and involvement. Why do we want to know about these? Child support increases the resources of the receiving (and diminishes the resources of the contributing) household. Fathers' time contribution may be compromised by obligations to children in different households. A critical research issue is how important to children's cognitive achievement and adjustment is nonresidential paternal contact and involvement (generally) compared with financial support. Research suggests that it depends on the outcome (achievement, behavior, relationships) and subgroup. For example, my research demonstrates that financial support matters more for the relationship between parents of White children than for those of Hispanics and Black children. This may be because of the greater amount of informal noncash and in-kind support from Hispanic and Black fathers.

### **Child Support Received/Provided**

In 2002, 63% of all custodial mothers had a support agreement or award; three-quarters received some support, but only half received the full amount (Garasky et al., 2007). Six in ten received noncash support. Most questions establish the legal basis for support. The first questions determine whether a child is eligible, that is, there is a living nonresidential parent. Some then focus on whether there is a child support award agreement – formal or informal. Other sequences just ask whether the custodial parent is supposed to receive child support, whether she receives it regularly, and whether she receives the entire amount. Some ask what the amount is. In previous research I have used the item on the regularity of support. I have also used the trend in total amount of support from the time of the departure of the father (Hofferth et al., 2010). The most important and most often missing piece is that of informal support. The ECLS-K asked formal support but did not begin to ask about informal cash and in-kind support until the third grade interview. This makes the question useless for analysts examining change

over time. One suggestion from the last Counting Couples conference was to include information on modifications of child support orders. Child support provided to other households is not always asked, but should be parallel to questions about receipt.

### **Contact**

Most surveys include questions about the frequency of contact over a specified period of time, such as last month or last year (Argys et al., 2007). Questions include the number of visits, and the number of days/nights spent with the other parent. The type of contact is important – in person visits, phone calls, cards and letters, and email or other messages. I have created and used a variable for trend in contact — is contact becoming more or less frequent? The usefulness of cross-sectional contact information is unclear because contact has no consistent relationship with child outcomes. It could be cause or effect. For the relationship between father and child, the amount of contact is less important than the quality of the parent-parent relationship (Hofferth et al., 2010).

### **Involvement**

Involvement is now preferred to the word “contact.” Surveys have begun asking about the quality of relationship between parents and the relationship/involvement of the father with the child. In my research on child support, contact and father involvement, parent-parent relationship was defined by how often parents got along and whether parents agreed on how to raise the child. The NLSY also obtained information on whether father and child were close, whether they shared ideas, and whether the father did not miss events, which were used to measure father involvement with his child. A last dimension is distance between parents. This variable is not useful (unless one can get a trend in distance) because it is selective – fathers may

move closer to the child's household if the relationship is good. Probably the most important reason is that, today, contact is less dependent upon distance.

### **Assistance to Children in the Transition to Adulthood**

Cross-household data limitations become sharper when we move from child support to less charted territory: provision of assistance to children during the transition to adulthood. This transition begins in the parental household and ends in the separate household of the young adult. One approach is to document the support provided by parents and received by children even prior to the transition. Earlier support for school expenses (including private schooling), financial training, and support for minor purchases could set expectations for supports for college and for the purchase of a home. Appropriately (because of the ages of the youth in the survey), the NLSY young adult survey and the NLS-97 asked questions about sources of financial support. The Panel Study of Income Dynamics Transition to Adulthood supplement also has a substantial module on financial support for young adults (Panel Study of Income Dynamics, 2011). These get at actual exchanges of goods and services. It might also be helpful to get the youth's expectations about support to be received from a parent (Goldscheider, Turcotte & Kopp, 2001). Documenting which parent is providing support is increasingly important now that many parents are living apart from their children.

An alternative approach is to question household members about *potential* access to financial and other supports even if they are not currently using these supports. One of the problems with using actual exchanges is that they are both rare and selective of people who need support (Hofferth, Boisjoly & Duncan, 1999). A standard sequence is: "In the past five years, has anyone in your household spent a lot of time helping a friend or relative in an emergency? In the last five years have you helped a friend or relative in an emergency by giving or loaning them

several hundred dollars or more?” Many other families have access to supports but are not using these resources at the moment. In addition, the PSID asked a series of questions:

“Suppose there were a serious emergency in your household. Is there a friend or relative living nearby that you could call upon to spend a lot of time helping out? Suppose in an emergency you needed several hundred dollars more than you had available or could borrow from an institution. Would you ask either a friend or relative for it?”

### **Support for Aging Parents**

The last area I’ll address is that of support for aging parents. The major national survey of aging – the Health and Retirement Study funded by the National Institute on Aging — documents support received by the aging parent. The surveys covered in this conference primarily focus on young men, women and their families, but many have aging parents, and most ask about support given, though rarely are contributions to mothers and fathers reported separately. This is an important issue for support of baby boom generations, with their high levels of marital dissolution. I do not have time to go into this area in detail, but it is a topic of significant importance for the coming decade and should receive more attention as these current youth age.

### **Potential Research Designs**

Finally, I want to address the issue of selection (Hofferth, 2005). If we only know about exchanges that have occurred, we have a select and partial picture of families as potential support source. Some individuals may have access but not need these exchanges. One example would be loans for college. Some students may not need family loans because they can get a scholarship whereas others may need family assistance. Some have an emergency and others do not. It may be that it is the potential availability of assistance rather than the assistance itself that



influences decision-making behavior (Hofferth et al., 1999). The only data set that routinely collects cross-household information is the Panel Study of Income Dynamics. This is because the PSID follows sample members as they leave home. So it is possible to link parent households with child households. Further, it is possible to link former spouses at least until the child is age 18. If the parent has a sample child living with him/her, that parent is followed even if the parent is not a member of the original sample. From 1994 to 2005, both parents of sample children were followed up even after the child turned age 18. The PSID provides the necessary information (ID numbers) to identify parents and their households.

The alternative approach is to obtain information from one household member and contact nonresidential household members directly. The ECLS-B obtained information directly from the nonresidential father, but response rates were low – 50%. The Fragile Families survey also obtained information on the nonresidential father. The PSID experience suggests that following fathers as they split-off from the original family is a more efficient and effective way to go. However, most of our surveys are household-based (CPS) and not family-based or they follow individuals (ECLS, NLS). Most studies do not consistently collect information on more than one person and most follow only the original respondent. The PSID is the only pure family study that we have. It should serve as a model for other studies. The value of the PSID that it provides the universe of potential nonhousehold family members with whom exchange can occur. Without this, the exchanges we document are highly selective.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

Families are dynamic entities, constantly forming and reforming households. These households continue to be linked socially and financially, but current data collection may not

take this into account. I have described three research areas in which these exchanges are important: 1) support by nonresidential parents to their children – financial support, contact, and involvement; 2) support parents provide as children transition out of the home, including supporting children while they complete their schooling and providing support as they leave home to form their own families; and 3) support by children to aging parents. In so doing I hope to promote discussion of key scientific questions, priorities, and appropriate data collection methods to obtain information about family ties across households.

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