Measuring Family Structure and Instability amidst Rapid Demographic Change

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Counting Couples, Counting Families Conference
National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD
July 20, 2011

Background

- Family structure draws our attention to children and intergenerational relationships
- Has been a major topic in family research in recent decades
- Family structure linked with child and adolescent wellbeing
  - Behavioral problems, lower educational attainment, having a teen birth, etc.
- But, some of the association is likely due to unobserved heterogeneity

Background (cont.)

- Divorce (1970s/1980s)
- Stepfamilies
- Cohabiting families
- Nonmarital childbearing
- Union dissolution/repartnering (along with social parents and multi-partnered fertility) have increased the focus on instability and complexity
- Family instability linked with adverse child outcomes
- Variation in two-parent families that are 'good' for kids (same-sex couples and adoptive parents)

What is Family Structure?

- No single survey question asks, "what is your family structure?" (average lay person probably doesn't even know the term!)
- Researchers must piece together information about parents and children:
  - Marital/partnership status of parents
  - Living arrangements
  - Biological relatedness
- Instability is *change* in family structure (or aspects thereof)

Marital/Partnership Status

- Marital status signals history and character of dyadic relationship and may affect future wellbeing
- Important to capture nature of union between two biological parents or one biological parent and one social parent
  - Legally married, living together as partners, dating, or have no romantic relationship?
- Not all relationships reach the threshold of 'family'
- Need to understand when (and by what criteria) to include new partners

Living Arrangements

- Who is in a given household affects distribution of HH resources, economies of scale, and the 'filing unit' for tax/transfer policy
- Children (or parents) may spend time in multiple households
- Important to understand 'who's there'

Biological Relatedness

- Affects level and nature of investment in offspring and relationships
- With union instability/repartnering, children likely to live with 'social parent'
- With multi-partnered fertility, many children will have half- or step-sibling (in same or other household)

FS Measurement Has Evolved

- Cross-sectional dichotomies: Father present vs. absent, or two-parent vs. one-parent families
- More nuanced categories: Married biological parents, stepfamilies, single-parent families, etc.
- Various aspects of FS: Ever in a given family type, duration, number of transitions, etc.
- Longitudinal measures – capture more complete range of experiences over childhood (mutually exclusive and exhaustive FS categories by mothers' marital status)
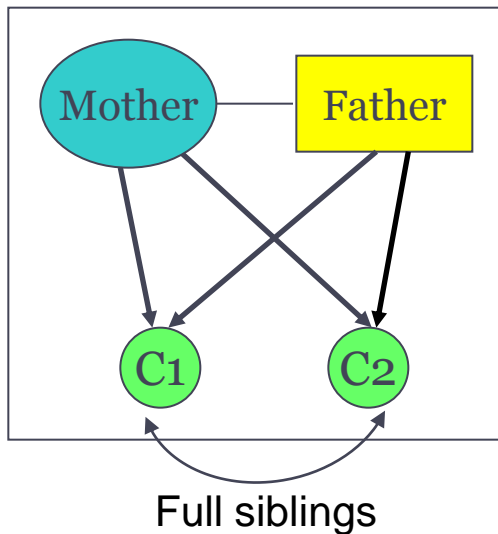
So How Are We Doing?

- Pretty well with 'basic' FS categories as a function of (change in) marital status over time
- Nonmarital relationships less clear:
  - Cohabitation (is it same partner across surveys? living together 'some of the time'?)
  - Dating relationships (what to count?)
  - Same-sex couples (poorly measured)
- Time dimension not always well-measured for finer gradations in partner changes or living arrangements (including duration)
- Rarely capture distinctions in biological relatedness of children (to parents, parent-figures, siblings)
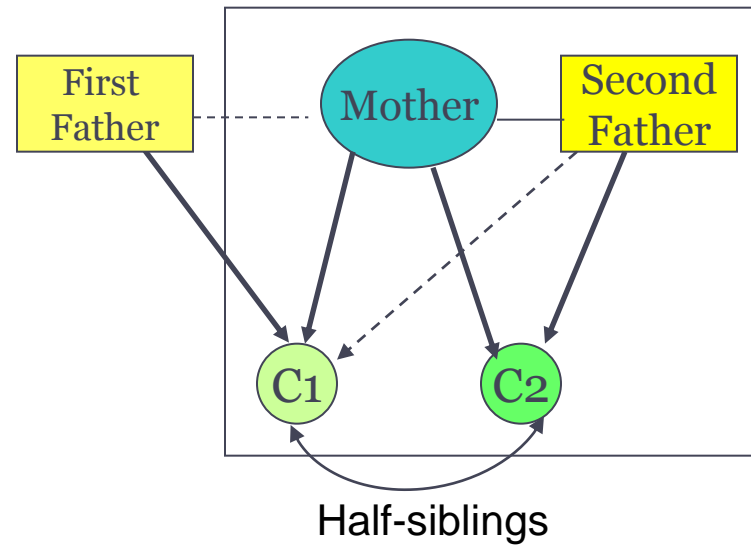
Data Issues Going Forward

- Need to think about what/who 'counts' as family amidst growing complexity and instability
  - E.g., when is mom's new boyfriend part of the family?
- And what 'counts' as a transition and hence instability?
  - E.g., new boyfriend; boyfriend moves in; couple gets married?
- Look to theory – what do families do? How do families define their boundaries?
- Need to recognize that not all members of a given household will have/perceive the same family structure

Different Perspectives on Family Structure among Family Members

Two Biological Parents

Full siblings

Biological Mother, Social Father

Half-siblings

Data Issues (cont.)

- Need to consider how who responds affects reports about family structure
- Also, adults and children may have different knowledge about their family situation
  - E.g., the NLSY97 asks the adult respondent whether youth knows that father/mother-figure is not their biological parent
- Important to recognize that families today often span households (next session!)
- Need to develop categories that are detailed enough to be informative yet big enough to be empirically useful

Looking toward the Future

Two basic approaches:

1) Survey-defined measurement:
   - Develop ever more detailed Qs and categories to capture complex families, e.g. Add Health
   - <u>Positive</u>: can be certain key pieces of information have been reported
   - <u>Negative</u>: questionnaire time and respondent burden

Add Health

Which description best fits [NAME]'s relationship to you?		Which description best fits [NAME]'s relationship to you?
Full brother	W1-3	Biological father
Full brother/sister	W1-3	Biological father/mother
Twin brother/sister	W1-3	Stepfather
Half-brother	W1-3	Step father/mother
Half-brother/sister	W4	Adoptive father
Stepbrother	W4	Adoptive father/mother
Stepbrother/sister	W1-3	Step/adoptive father
Adoptive brother	W4	Step father/mother who has adopted you
Adoptive brother/sister	W1-3	Foster father
Foster brother	W4	Foster father/mother
Other brother	W1-3	Other father
Full sister	W1-3	Biological mother
Half-sister	W1-3	Stepmother
Stepsister	W1-3	Adoptive mother
Adoptive sister	W1-3	Step/adoptive mother
Foster sister	W1-3	Foster mother
Other sister	W1-3	Other mother

Looking toward the Future (cont.)

2) Respondent-defined measurement:
   ▫ Use family map or diagram
   ▫ Prompts for key actors (mother, father, children)
   ▫ <u>Positive</u>: Allows individuals to determine who *they* consider to be family members and better capture families across HHs
   ▫ <u>Negative</u>: Some family members may be excluded (by omission or commission)

Looking toward the Future (cont.)

- Ultimately, can't measure everything (especially in any given survey)
- Family theory may help guide which aspects of family structure are important to measure and why
- Particular surveys will likely use different approaches, and researchers can determine what is most salient for a given research question