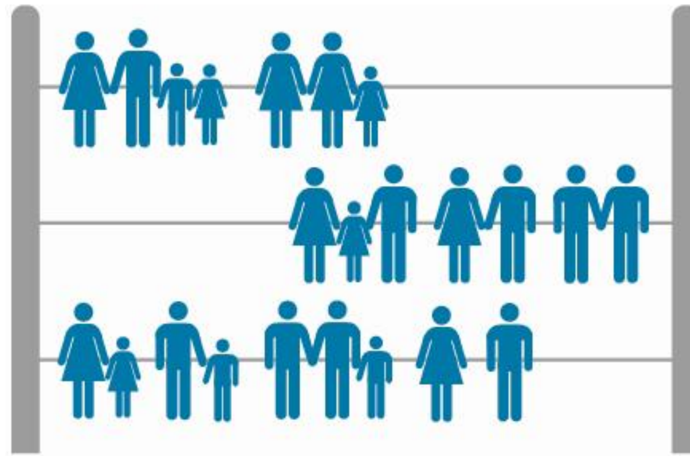

Counting Couples,
Counting Families

Measuring Family Structure and Instability amidst Rapid Demographic Change

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Family structure—and particularly how it affects child wellbeing—has been a major topic within family research over the past several decades. An extensive literature has documented that, on average, children's spending time in a family structure other than with their two married biological parents is associated with a greater risk of a number of adverse outcomes such as behavioral problems and delinquency, lower educational attainment, dropping out of high school, and having a teen birth (Astone and McLanahan 1991; McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Painter and Levine 2000; Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2004); it is important to note that these studies are based on observational data, so some—but likely not all—of the association may be due to unobserved heterogeneity (Cherlin 1999; Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2004).

The early family structure literature developed in the context of the rising/high divorce rates of the 1970s and 1980s, as it was recognized that a large fraction of children would experience their parents' divorce. More recent research has focused on other family types, especially cohabiting families with children (either before or after marriage) and families begun by a nonmarital birth. The high rates of dissolution and re-partnering in such families—along with the presence of so-called 'social parents' (typically fathers) in children's lives and high levels of multi-partnered fertility (parents having children by more than one partner)—have increased the focus on instability and complexity in family life within the last decade. Building on Wu's work in the 1990s (e.g., Wu 1996), recent studies suggest that high levels of family instability (i.e., transitions in family structure) may be detrimental to children's wellbeing (Fomby and Cherlin 2007; Osborne and McLanahan 2007). In addition, new research has challenged the view that two-parent families most beneficial for children must include a biological father and mother, as some studies have shown that outcomes for children and youth living with same-sex parents do not differ from those living with opposite-sex parents (Wainright, Russell, and Patterson 2004) and that those with adoptive parents do just as well as those with biological parents (Hamilton, Cheng, and Powell 2007).

As the diversity of families has continued to increase, the challenge of—and need for—researchers to accurately *describe* contemporary families and *understand* how their structure (and what goes on within them—but that is another topic) affects the next generation has only become greater. In this brief paper, I highlight several points for consideration about measuring family structure and instability, I describe what I see as the strengths and limitations of current measures, and I suggest some ideas related to future measurement and research.

Even amidst rapid change in family demography, the family remains the institution that bears the primary responsibility for the care and socialization of children, charged with rearing the next generation to become healthy and productive citizens, workers, partners and parents. While units without children can certainly be considered families, the concept of family structure implicitly points our attention to families with children. Family structure represents the intersection of three key pieces of information – marital/partnership status (of parents), living arrangements, and biological relatedness;[1] instability reflects change in family structures (or aspects thereof) over time.

Marital/partnership status. Among family ties, the marital relationship has often been viewed as central to nuclear family dynamics (Cummings and O'Reilly 1997); marriage signals the history and character of a dyadic relationship and may prospectively affect social and economic wellbeing via (among other mechanisms) the "enforceable trust" of a public commitment (Cherlin 2004) and by increasing men's earnings (Waite and Gallagher 2000). Whereas childbearing historically occurred within (stable) marriage, today marriages (particularly those to lower-SES parents) have a high likelihood of dissolving (Martin 2006). Many births occur to cohabiting couples (Raley 2001), including after marital dissolution (Brown 2000). Also, fully 41 percent of births now occur outside of marriage (Hamilton, Martin, and Ventura 2010), and the majority of unmarried couples are in a romantic relationship (including about half that are cohabiting) at the

[1] I thank Sara McLanahan for this point via personal communication around the year 2000.

time of a child's birth (McLanahan Forthcoming). Therefore, children have a high likelihood of experiencing a family type other than that of two married biological parents. To measure family structure today, it is important to understand the nature of the union between the parents of a focal child (or one parent and another partner who may serve as a parent figure) – are they legally married, living together, dating, or have no romantic relationship? At the same time, with respect to new partners, it is important to recognize that not all new relationships reach the threshold of 'family,' i.e., not all dating partners of mothers or fathers will be involved with children or have a long-term relationship. Understanding when (and by what criteria) to include new partners is a useful topic for future research.

Living arrangements. Second, it is important to understand who is living in the household, because living with others affects the distribution of household resources, economies of scale, and the filing unit for tax and transfer policy. Recent research has suggested that 'living together' may not be a discrete status (Manning and Smock 2005) and that reports about whether one is living together may depend on how or to whom the question is asked (Knab and McLanahan 2006) and when the question is asked (Teitler, Reichman, and Koball 2006). Differing custody arrangements may imply that children divide their time across households and do not have a 'primary' residence. It is important to gather information about all household members, including individuals who may come and go from a given household; for example, half-siblings of a focal child, or the partner of a biological parent.

Biological ties. Evolutionary psychologists draw our attention to the importance of biological (or genetic) ties for determining the level and nature of investment in offspring and relationships (Daly and Wilson 2000). With greater instability and high levels of re-partnering, children are likely to spend time living with the partner of one of their biological parents: two-fifths of children will live in a cohabiting family by age 12 (Kennedy and Bumpass 2008), and nearly

one-third will experience a married or cohabiting stepfamily (Bumpass, Raley, and Sweet 1995). Therefore, many children will be living with a social father (or social mother). High levels of multi-partnered fertility imply that many children will also have half- or step-siblings who may or may not live in the same household. Understanding both biological and non-biological family ties is important for fully capturing family structure today.

So how well are contemporary surveys doing in measuring family structure and family instability? I would suggest that current surveys do quite well at capturing the 'basic' family structure categories by marital status at a given point in time – we generally know, for example, if a child is living with two married biological parents versus a married stepfamily versus a divorced single mother. However, in unmarried families, the partnership status of the unmarried parent(s) is often unclear, including whether they are cohabiting, in a dating relationship or have no partner. For example, some studies ask about cohabitation at each survey, but it is not always clear whether the cohabiting partner is the same person across waves. Many surveys do not collect information on the less 'discrete' categories of couple relationships, such as dating relationships of couples that live together 'some of the time'; excluding such relationships significantly underestimates the degree of instability in family life, particularly for families begun by a nonmarital birth (Osborne and McLanahan 2007). Also, many surveys do not capture the full trajectory of family structure over time, which is crucial for measuring instability; some surveys ask about marriage and divorce since the past survey, but few capture finer gradations in partner changes or living arrangements or can measure the duration of relationships. In addition, measures (and studies) of family structure rarely capture distinctions in the biological relatedness of children – to parents and parent-figures as well as to siblings. Exceptions include studies of blended families that focus on biological and non-biological children of the same resident father(-figure) (e.g., Hofferth 2006).

It is important to recognize that with growing family complexity, individuals in the same household may not, in fact, have the same definition of their family—because they have different biological or affective ties to particular members inside or outside the household. Therefore, it is important to consider *who* the respondent is in a given survey and whether full information is collected to evaluate the complete array of family relationships for all members. Also, it is important to recognize that adults and children may have different knowledge about the family situation, and surveys need to be sensitive to such. For example, the NLSY97 asks the adult respondent whether the youth knows that a father- or mother-figure is not their biological father or mother.

Overall, it is crucial to recognize that families today often span households, particularly if children live away from one biological parent (typically the father)—and parents live away from some or all of their biological children. Many of our surveys are household-based, so they focus on collecting information about who is in the household (i.e., with detailed household rosters) but often completely miss any 'outside' family ties; similarly, within the family structure literature, most studies use household measures of family structure. Hence, for example, a married couple with two biological children in the same household would look identical to a married couple with two biological children together but where the father has a child by a prior partner that lives elsewhere (and may come to visit and hence affect family dynamics). The session on 'families across households' will likely address such topics.

In terms of future measurement and research, it seems to me there are two fundamental strategies for better capturing the variability in contemporary families, each with strengths and weaknesses. The first strategy is to develop ever more detailed survey questions and categories to try to capture all possible family configurations in which a respondent may live. Good examples of this approach are in the ECLS-K (i.e., the section where respondents are asked about their

relationship to a given child) and Add Health (i.e., the section where respondents are given extensive choices about how they might be related to another household member). The upside of this approach is that with detailed and extensive questions, one can be certain that all the key pieces of information have been reported – who is in the household and what are the biological and legal relationships between them. The downside is that it requires extensive questionnaire time, and many of the categories will not be relevant to a given respondent, leading to significant respondent burden in getting the full information.

The second strategy would be to allow the respondent to proactively describe the structure of his/her family in the form of a family map or diagram, with prompts for key pieces of information. The respondent would effectively be asked about 'who is in your family' and to identify particular family members, where they live, and how they are related. For example, adults would be asked about all their children, including any biological children living elsewhere, as well as unrelated children in the household. Children would be asked about their biological mother and father, any other parent-figures, full siblings, half siblings and step siblings. The NLSY79 currently has a question of this variety about siblings; the question asks how many brothers and sisters the respondent has, and the prompt says "please think of whomever you consider as your brothers and sisters." The advantage of this method is that it allows individuals to determine who *they* consider to be family members; the disadvantage is that it's possible that some family or household members could be missed if the respondent does not remember or intend to identify such.

Regardless of how the data are gathered, one important issue will be for researchers to develop and utilize categories of family structure that are sufficiently detailed to be meaningful in the context of current family diversity—yet also sufficiently large to allow for reasonable comparisons both substantively and empirically. Family theory may help guide our inquiry by suggesting which aspects of family structure are most important to measure and why. And

ultimately, it may be useful to utilize multiple measures of family structure and instability in a single investigation (e.g., Hill, Yeung, and Duncan 2001) in order better understand the nature and implications of family structure and instability from multiple perspectives.

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