



## **Recommendations for improving measurement of intimate partner relationships**

Submitted to the *Counting Couples, Counting Families* conference, 19-20 July 2011

by Gary J. Gates

The influence of the decades-old concept of POSSLQs (People of the Opposite-Sex Sharing Living Quarters) can still be evidenced in how measures of intimate partner relationships that occur outside of marriage are conceptualized on surveys.<sup>1</sup> The POSSLQ framework considers only different-sex couples and only those who are residing together in the same household. Despite clearly representing a subsample of possible forms of non-marital intimate relationships, this construct forms the basis for how most surveys measure this construct. Assessments of non-marital relationships are largely limited in scope to co-residential couples and few surveys take into account important conceptual and methodological issues that should be considered in measuring same-sex couples.

In this essay, I will highlight challenges associated with how we conceptualize and measure intimate relationships. The assessment focuses on a review of twelve publicly funded population-based surveys.<sup>2</sup> The essay considers how social scientists might expand beyond current conceptualizations beyond marriage and cohabitation to include a broader range of relationships, including those of same-sex couples. The essay also highlights specific challenges, conceptual and methodological, associated with measuring same-sex couples. This includes consideration of formal legal statuses like civil unions and registered domestic partnership that are now available to both same-sex and different-sex couples in several states.

### *Beyond marriage and POSSLQ: expanding the conceptualization of intimate partner relationships*

The approaches used to assess the presence of intimate relationships and to measure the legal status of those relationships are largely fixed in two paradigms, neither of which is grounded in an inclusive concept of intimate partner relationships. The first paradigm constructs a framework whereby relationships are largely divided into two types: marriage and everything else. The second paradigm assumes that for the “everything else” relationships, a key component is co-residency in a household.

Of course, the reality of intimate relationships is much more complex than these paradigms. The framework of marriage versus all other relationships forces a somewhat false dichotomy as we think of the nature of these relationships. Manning and Smock (2005) observed that couples do not frame their decision about union formation as marriage versus cohabitation but rather as cohabitation versus remaining single. They also observe that cohabitation is hardly a binary condition. Non-married cohabiting couples show substantial variation in the degree to which they co-reside. Variation in cohabitation also exists among married individuals. An estimated five percent of married individuals in the 2009 American Community Survey report that they are not separated and are not residing with their spouse.

The current methods most frequently used to measure relationships seem restrictive and rarely allow researchers to consider the totality of relationships outside of the structure of the household. They also often lack conceptual clarity and conflate varied constructs for measuring relationships. I would posit at least three distinctive conceptual constructs for measuring relationships:

---

<sup>1</sup> See Casper and Cohen (2000) for a review of the history of POSSLQ.

<sup>2</sup> American Community Survey (2000-2010), Consumer Expenditure Survey (2003, 2010), Current Population Survey (2000-2010), Early Childhood Longitudinal Study: Birth cohort, Early Childhood Longitudinal Study: Kindergarten class, Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, Add Health: National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 79, National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 97, National Survey of Family Growth (2006-2008), Survey of Income and Program Participation, and US Decennial Census (1990, 2000, 2010).

- Nature of the relationship: What terms do individuals use to describe their relationships? This construct is potentially distinct from a household roster where respondents are asked if a husband, wife, fiancé, partner, boyfriend, or girlfriend is living in a household. A more inclusive construct designed to assess if respondents are in a relationship and what specific terms they use to describe that relationship would not depend on co-residency. Decoupling co-residency from measuring the existence of intimate relationships could provide more accurate assessments of both the presence and nature of such relationships.
- Relationship behaviors and co-residency: How do individuals interact with their relationship partners? These might include questions about resource allocation, like those used in the Consumer Expenditure survey, or co-residency behaviors included in Add Health. This would also include co-residency constructs captured in household rosters like those used in Census, ACS, or CPS.
- Legal status: How have individuals formalized their relationships legally? This would be akin to typical marital status questions but needs to include a wider range of legal statuses like civil unions and registered domestic partnerships.

Questions that measure these constructs certainly exist on a wide array of surveys. But surveys rarely keep these concepts conceptually distinct. The vast majority of the surveys assessed for this essay condition the identification of relationships on co-residency, either via a household roster or by asking (as in the ECLS surveys) if partners, boyfriends, or girlfriends live in the household. Perhaps a more obvious conflation of these constructs can be found in the marital status question used in the NSFG. This includes the typical options of married, widowed, separate, divorced, or never married but also adds an option for not married but living with a partner of the opposite sex. Setting aside for the moment the obvious heterosexual bias of this question, it is also problematic in that the categories are not mutually exclusive. The question stem reads “What is your current marital status?” It is entirely possible that a respondent can simultaneously be living with a partner, currently married, divorced, and widowed. But perhaps even more importantly, by adding the partner option, the question conceptually veers away from assessing the current legal marital status of a person and instead adds an element of assessing some type of non-marital relationship.

In most surveys, marriage is the only relationship form that is measured without regard to co-residency. However, in the case of the American Community Survey and the decennial Census, the occupants of a household can affect how marital status is actually coded. If the householder designates another person as an “unmarried partner”, Census coding procedures do not allow either the householder or the unmarried partner to be designated as “currently married” in the marital status question. If either indicates that they are married, the response is subject to an allocation to another marital status. Again, this procedure conflates two different conceptual constructs, legal relationship status of an individual (which is not dependent on the presence of any other individual in the household) and how respondents describe their relationships to other individuals in a household. Census procedures also do not allow for the presence of multiple unmarried partners or spouses and do not permit households to include both a spouse and an unmarried partner. Such procedures confine these relationship measures to very specific parameters that largely narrow and perhaps somewhat distort our understanding of intimate relationships.

In order to really begin to understand the totality of relationships, surveys must take greater care to move beyond co-residency as a condition for the identification of relationships. They must also consider designing questions with substantially more conceptual clarity so that researchers can compare and

contrast how individuals describe their relationships, how those relationships manifest themselves in behaviors including co-residency, and what type of legal status those relationships may have.

### *Measuring same-sex relationships*

The treatment of same-sex relationships in surveys marks a particularly problematic aspect of relationship measurement. Some of the concerns in this regard are related to the issues of conceptual clarity described above and to issues associated with measuring small populations. But much more problematic is a hetero-normative perspective that seems to pervade relationship measurement constructs. Another problem related to measuring same-sex relationships (but also potentially a problem in the measurement of different-sex relationships) is the lack of any questions designed to measure the increasing number of non-marital relationship recognition forms.

Methods used to identify same-sex couples in the decennial Census and ACS highlight both a general lack of conceptual clarity about same-sex relationships as well as serious measurement problems. Identification of cohabiting same-sex couples relies on both the household roster and the sex of respondents. A same-sex couple is identified when a householder designates another person of the same sex as a “husband/wife” or “unmarried partner”. Conceptually, the options of husband/wife and unmarried partner are even more limiting to same-sex couples than to different-sex couples. This is partly due to the complicated legal and social status of same-sex couples in the US.

Today, 15% of same-sex couples live in the six states (and DC) that permit them to marry. Approximately 25% of same-sex couples live in the 14 states that offer various forms of non-marital recognition including civil unions, registered domestic partnerships, and designated beneficiaries. Many municipalities maintain domestic partnership registries for same-sex couples. Regardless of state and local law, some religious communities will marry same-sex couples and the LGBT community has a long history of conducting commitment ceremonies. There is no federal recognition of any same-sex relationships. Given this history and legal complexity, terms like “husband/wife” and “unmarried” mean different things to same-sex couples than to different-sex couples. If you were married and live in Iowa, do you have a husband or wife if you know that you file your federal taxes as single? If a couple has had a civil union and receives the equivalent of spousal benefits from their employer, are they really “unmarried”? These terms are simply ill-suited to the realities of same-sex relationships.

Increasing the conceptual ambiguity, all same-sex couples are coded as “unmarried partners” in public use microdata files and flags that would indicate any alteration of “husband/wife” couples to “unmarried partner” are not included in these files. Further, Census Bureau procedures do not allow “unmarried partners” to be “currently married” in the marital status question. This means that any individual within a same-sex couple who indicates a status of “currently married” is recoded and allocated to another status.

A further complication with this form of measurement concerns the possibility that different-sex couples, who outnumber same-sex couples by roughly 100 to 1, occasionally miscode the sex of a spouse or partner and are mistakenly coded as same-sex couples. Gates and Steinberger (2011) suggest that as many as 30% of same-sex couples in the 2007 ACS and approximately 15% of same-sex couples in the 2008 and 2009 ACS (when improvements were made to reduce miscoding) may be miscoded different-sex couples and also offer methods to adjust data to minimize the error. However, as long as survey options do not explicitly distinguish between same-sex and different-sex spouses or partners (as the Canadian and UK Census options do), analyses of the Census and ACS same-sex couple data are challenging and come with a variety of caveats.

For essentially the same reasons as described regarding the household roster, a typical marital status question is also challenging for someone in a same-sex couple. This is likely to also become problematic for different-sex couples. Civil unions in Hawaii and Illinois and domestic partnerships in Nevada (all offering rights equivalent to marriage) are available to both same-sex and different-sex couples.

The fact that most surveys require that individuals in same-sex relationships use terms designed primarily for different-sex couples to describe their relationships is indicative of a hetero-normative bias. That bias is amplified when surveys actually restrict responses to explicitly describe different-sex relationships while not providing comparable options to describe same-sex relationships. The NSFG marital status question offers an example of this. It includes a response option of “not married but living together with a partner of opposite sex” but offers no mechanism to indicate that the respondent is not married but living with a same-sex partner.

Hetero-normativity in population-based surveys raises serious human subjects concerns. LGBT people and same-sex couples routinely experience social stigma in their daily lives. Their families do not treat their same-sex relationships as comparable to the different-sex relationships of siblings or other family members. Employers routinely provide benefits to different-sex married couples that are not available to same-sex couples. When surveys fail to provide options that allow same-sex couples to appropriately designate their relationships or, even worse, when they explicitly only inquire about different-sex relationships, this amounts to a reinforcement of social stigma. It signals to LGBT respondents that same-sex relationships are not valued and are not actually comparable to different-sex relationships. This is a concern that Institutional Review Boards should take more seriously.

Ten years ago, after California passed its first domestic partnership law, only 13% of Americans lived in a state that offered any legal recognition for same-sex couples. Today, more than 40% of the US population lives in a state with at least some form of legal recognition for same-sex couples and more than one in ten Americans lives in a state that allows same-sex couples to marry. Surveys designed to measure intimate relationships must begin to adapt to these changes. The Census Bureau has recently conducted testing on alterations to both the household roster and marital status questions that would improve measurement of same-sex couple relationships. This is a clear step forward, but the process is still focused only on couples and essentially maintains a paradigm of using the household roster and legal relationship status to measure relationships.

It seems self-evident that knowledge of a person’s sexual orientation and gender identity would be a crucial component to understanding the nature of their intimate relationships. Yet of the surveys reviewed for this essay, only Add Health and the NSFG include questions designed to measure sexual orientation and none assess gender identity. The recent Institute of Medicine (2011) review of LGBT health disparities observed that a detailed identification of specific gaps in LGBT health research was not actually possible given the lack of population-based data that allowed for identification of LGBT respondents. The review called for broad-based inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity measures in population-based surveys.

US Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius recently announced a process for adding sexual orientation and gender identity questions to the National Health Interview Survey and eventually other HHS surveys. Federal statistical agencies must follow the lead of HHS and initiate appropriate steps for routinely including sexual orientation and gender identity questions on population-based surveys. The absence of such data severely restricts the ability of researchers to understand the totality of human relationships and reinforces a heterosexual bias in available research.

It limits the ability of social scientists to contribute in a meaningful way to the many public policy debates about the role of government in sanctioning or restricting certain types of human relationships, including those between same-sex partners.

### *Recommendations*

In conclusion, I would offer the following recommendations for improving our ability to study intimate partner relationships:

- Refocus the measurement of relationships away from marriage and co-residency and toward a broader concept of what constitutes intimate relationships.
- Develop methods of measuring relationships that offer greater conceptual clarity. The ability of individuals to describe a relationship should not be contingent on either co-residency or marital status and those constructs should be separated in survey questions.
- Develop methods of measuring legal relationship status that encompass emerging forms of non-marital relationship recognition including civil unions and registered domestic partnership.
- Develop methods of measuring relationships that are inclusive of both different-sex and same-sex relationships and allow for accurate measurement of both groups.
- Institutional Review Boards should consider the ramifications of hetero-normative relationship measurements on population-based surveys and challenge the conduct of research that potentially stigmatizes LGBT respondents.
- Include measurement of sexual orientation and gender identity as a standard demographic characteristic in population-based surveys, especially those focused on measuring intimate relationships.

### *References*

- Casper, LM, Cohen, PN. 2000. How Does POSSLQ Measure Up? Historical estimates of cohabitation. *Demography* 37(2): 237-245.
- Gates, GJ, Steinberger, MD. 2011. Same-sex Unmarried Partner Couples in the American Community Survey: The role of misreporting, miscoding, and misallocation. Working paper presented at UCLA-California Center for Population Research and UC-Berkeley Population Center Miniconference on Census Microdata and Applications, UCLA, 3 June.
- Institute of Medicine of the National Academies. 2011. *The Health of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender People: Building a Foundation for Better Understanding*. Board on the Health of Select Populations, Institute of Medicine of The National Academies, The National Academies Press, Washington, DC.
- Manning, WD, Smock, PJ. 2005. Measuring and Modeling Cohabitation: New Perspectives From Qualitative Data. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67(4): 989-1002.