



Beyond the Nuclear Family: Identifying but Not Stigmatizing Variation in Intimate and Parental Ties

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My interest in families

- Quantitative family sociologist/demographer
- Study family behaviors, especially childbearing, that are somehow “non-traditional” but are, in fact, very, very normal
- Frustrated by what our surveys and other sources of data *cannot* tell us

How do we measure families?

- Many nationally representative surveys still assume, at least implicitly, a nuclear family structure
 - Standard North American Family (SNAF)
 - Heterosexual legally married couple and any children who coreside in the same household (Leticq, 2016)
 - Coresidence – especially marriage – is privileged
 - Childbearing and childrearing occur primarily within a single – and coresidential – relationship
- Often, we have to **INFER** information about family behaviors that do not adhere to this model

How do we measure families?

- Attempts to measure family ties in different ways
 - Stepfamilies
 - Formal vs. informal
 - Coresident vs. non-coresident
 - Snapshot vs. longitudinal
 - Parental vs. sibling ties
 - Individual vs. couples
 - Multipartnered fertility (MPF) – having children with different partners
 - Individual-level characteristic? Or a relationship-level characteristic?
 - Is MPF about fertility? Or about relationships?
 - Identification challenges
 - The ‘old’ ways of collecting data about childbearing and about coresidential relationships

How do we measure changes in families?

- Fluidity in individual relationships is missed
 - Emphasis on events as the end point
 - Relationship starts and ends are rarely finite events
 - Dates!!!
- Fluidity in individual relationships is considered a bad thing
 - Are breakups inherently negative? Even for children?
 - Is having different ties within a family inherently problematic?

How does terminology affect data collection and analysis?

- Terminology for families that do not fit the SNAF model:
 - Family complexity
 - Family instability
 - MPF
 - Churning
 - Skipped generation
- Good news: rarely use these terms directly in surveys!
- Bad news: still affect how we collect and analyze data
 - On these family behaviors/structures
 - On the outcomes researchers choose to link to these family behaviors/structures

Why does measurement matter?

- Many families do not adhere to strict household boundaries nor to biological/adoptive relationship definitions
 - Not new!
- What, and who, have we been missing?
 - Diversity across gender, race-ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, nativity, social class, and other axes of marginalization
 - Questions
 - Sampling frames

Questions to think on...

- What direct questions could we ask to identify families and family behaviors that don't fit the SNAF model?
 - Are direct questions likely to be affected by social desirability?
- What sorts of *positive* questions should we be asking to identify benefits families that do not fit the SNAF model?
- How might we ameliorate the challenges of sampling frame issues and/or reliance only on individuals rather than couples?