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
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 (Letiecq, 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?