Measuring Family Structure and Instability: Emerging Trends and Challenges

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Introduction

• Family living arrangements and trajectories are increasingly varied and complex
  – Union formation and dissolution patterns
  – Childbearing contexts

• A review of the family structure and stability literature
  – Current measurement approaches
  – Measurement challenges
Children’s Family Experiences

• Childbearing contexts are diverse (Martin et al. 2009)
  – About 40% of births occur outside of marriage
  – Half of nonmarital births are to cohabiters
  – Children in unmarried families experience greater family instability, on average

• Children spend less time in married parent families and more time in families formed outside of marriage
## Children’s Living Arrangements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Structure, Children Aged 0-17 in 2004</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Two Biological Married family</td>
<td>60.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Biological Cohabiting family</td>
<td>2.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married Stepfamily</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabiting Stepfamily</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Mother family</td>
<td>20.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Father family</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Parent family</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Kreider, Rose M. 2007. *Living Arrangements of Children: 2004*. Current Population Reports, P70-114. U.S. Census Bureau, Washington, DC. (Adapted from Figure 1, page 5)
Measurement Approaches

• The measurement of family structure tends to be consistent across studies.

• New approaches elucidate various forms of complexity:
  – Heterogeneity among two parent families
  – Family membership
  – Emerging family forms
  – Prospective vs retrospective measurement
  – Family boundary ambiguity
Heterogeneity among Two Parent Families

• Two parent families: union type, parentage (Artis 2006; Brown 2004)
  – Married two biological parent
  – Married stepparent
  – Cohabiting two biological parent
  – Cohabiting stepparent

• Same-sex parent families (married or cohabiting) (Biblarz and Stacey 2010)
Family Membership

• **Sibling composition**  (Ginther and Pollak 2004; Halpern-Meekin and Tach 2008)
  – Many children (6-11%) with two bio married parents are in a stepfamily

• **Ties across households** (Carlson and Furstenberg 2006)
  – Multiple partner fertility
  – Step or half siblings

• **Non-coresidential dating partners**  (Osborne and McLanahan 2007)
  – “Visiting” relationships in Fragile Families
Emerging Family Forms

• Cohabiting unions
  – “Unmarried partner” vs “boyfriend/girlfriend” (Manning and Smock 2005)
  – Part-time vs full-time presence (Knab and McLanahan 2006)

• LAT (Living Apart Together) relationships
  – Married or cohabiting-like couples who reside in separate households (Strohm et al. 2009)
  – How to distinguish from dating relationships?
  – Definition and measurement unclear
Prospective vs Retrospective Measurement

- Retrospective reports of family structure do not always align with prospective measures
- Fragile Families birth (baseline) and one year follow-up

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Follow-up Report</th>
<th>Baseline Report</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Married 97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabiting</td>
<td>Cohabiting 89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single</td>
<td>Single 67%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Teitler, Julien O., Reichman, Nancy E., and Heather Koball. 2006. “Contemporaneous Versus Retrospective Reports of Cohabitation in the Fragile Families Survey.” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 68:469-477. (Adapted from Table 1, page 472)
Family Boundary Ambiguity

- Family structure is subjective (Cherlin 2010; White 1998)

- Who do we ask about family structure?
  - Mothers vs children

- The more complex the family form, the higher the proportion of discrepant reports, i.e., boundary ambiguity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mother Reports</th>
<th>No Boundary Ambiguity (%)</th>
<th>Boundary Ambiguity (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Two bio</td>
<td>99.4</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Mother</td>
<td>88.4</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married Step</td>
<td>69.8</td>
<td>30.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabiting Step</td>
<td>34.1</td>
<td>65.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## Implications for Population Estimates of Family Structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Structure</th>
<th>Adolescent</th>
<th>Mother</th>
<th>Combined</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Two Bio Parents</td>
<td>62.0%</td>
<td>58.2%</td>
<td>57.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Mother</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>18.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married Step</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>10.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabitating Step</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boundary Ambiguity</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>10.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Implementing New Approaches

- Future data collection efforts need to accommodate these complexities
  - Emphasize longitudinal designs
  - Incorporate multiple family members across households
  - Use more nuanced measures of family configurations

- Move beyond static comparisons across family structure to fuse together the concepts of family structure and stability
Family Stability and Child Well-Being

- Family structure provides a snapshot of children’s living arrangements.
- Some family forms are more stable than others; family structure is confounded with family stability.
  - During a one year period, 7% of teens experienced a family transition.
  - For teens not in two bio parent families, the figure was 15%. (Brown 2006)
Family Instability Patterns

• Family instability varies by birth context (Raley and Wildsmith 2004)
  – A majority of children born to married parents experience no transitions
  – Most children born to single mothers or cohabiting parents experience at least one

• Important to include both marital and cohabiting transitions (Raley and Wildsmith 2004)
  – Family instability increases 30% for whites and 100% for Blacks by including cohabitation
Marital vs Nonmarital Transitions

- Marital transitions (both divorce and remarriage) have cumulative, negative effects on child well-being (Cavanaugh and Huston 2008; Fomby and Cherlin 2007)

- Cohabitation transitions operate differently (Brown 2006)
  - Transitions out of a cohabiting family into a single mother family linked to gains in well-being (or no change)
  - Stable cohabiting families can be detrimental (vs stable single mom or stable married step)
Measuring Family Instability

- Number of transitions (Bulanda and Manning 2008; Cavanaugh 2008)
  - Cumulative effects?

- Types of family transitions (Brown 2006; Hao and Xie 2002)
  - Marital vs nonmarital (cohabiting) transitions

- Timing of family transitions (Cavanaugh and Huston 2008; Heard 2007)
  - Early childhood

- Exposure to family forms (Dunifon and Kowaleski-Jones 2002; Magnuson and Berger 2009)
  - Ever, duration, or proportion of childhood
Measurement Challenges

• How we conceptualize and measure family instability should be informed by theory
  – No consensus on how to operationalize it
  – Some use more than one indicator
  – Some control for current family structure
  – Some control for family structure at birth

• Data have outpaced theory development
Next Steps

• Family scholars must revisit and expand existing theories related to family instability
  – Family stress theory

• Develop new theoretical frameworks for understanding how, why, and when family instability shapes children’s outcomes

• Theory development could be informed by a systematic review of empirical findings
Next Steps (cont)

• Strive for greater consistency across studies in the measurement of family instability

• Pay greater attention to subpopulations in which family instability might have differential effects on child well-being
  – Disadvantaged populations
  – Racial and ethnic minority groups (especially Latinos)
Conclusions

• Family structure is more ambiguous now
  – E.g., cohabitation, ties across households

• Diverse living arrangements have generated more interest in family instability
  – Family instability measures are varied

• Innovative measurement requires new concepts and theories that reflect the rapid changes in U.S. family life