Who is in the Family? Family Membership Based on Parent and Child Household Matrices

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ABSTRACT

The measurement of family living arrangements is important because it has implications for our understanding of the well-being of families and children. American families have undergone rapid transformation. As a consequence it is more challenging to capture their living arrangements. Social science measurement of family structure has not kept pace with the complexity of family life. Further, this complexity implies that children and parents may have different views of who belongs to their family. To provide a comprehensive assessment of family living arrangements we draw on a new, web-based data collection that includes complete household membership matrices from multiple family members (n=645 parent-child pairs). These findings will advance our understanding of family relationships and make possible assessments of family measurement strategies.

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It is well documented that children are increasingly experiencing a rise in the number and types of family transitions resulting in complex living arrangements for children and their parents. Extensive research has focused on the implications of these complex family structure for the health and well-being of adults and children (e.g., McLanahan and Sandefur 1994; Brown 2004; Cherlin 1999). Yet data collections meant to capture the living arrangements of children and adults have not kept pace with current family trends (e.g., stepfamilies, multiple partner fertility). The research community has called for more advanced ways of measuring children's family structures (Counting Couples 2001 and 2011; Explaining Family Change 2008).

Drawing on the household matrix relationships collected from a parent and child living in the household we extend knowledge about measurement of family structure by examining the variation in family measurement that occurs within families and produce by various socio-demographic characteristics (i.e., race/ethnicity, age, gender, income level, marital status). No recent study has evaluated the use of household relationship matrices from multiple family members. Taking advantage of newly collected data, this study builds on the literature of measurement and meaning of family structure in an increasingly complex family environment.

BACKGROUND

Family structure is often treated as an objective social fact when in reality family structure reports are based on subjective views of family life based in part of family boundary ambiguity (Boss 2007; White 1998). The measurement challenges posed by emerging family forms are not new. There is extensive research on the ambiguities surrounding married stepfamilies, which Cherlin (1978) characterized as "incomplete institutions" because the norms and expectations involved in this family type are not clearly defined. Stepfamilies require individual members to create kinship ties and establish among themselves the contours of their responsibilities and

obligations to one another. Doing the work of kinship is difficult for many stepfamilies and contributes to their instability (Cherlin & Furstenberg, 1994). The incomplete institutionalization of new family forms is linked to the measurement challenges involved with complex family structures (White, 1998). Without shared understandings of the norms and roles involved in these "nontraditional" families, family boundary ambiguity leads to inconsistencies in reports of who is in and who is out of the family (Ganong & Coleman, 1994; Stewart, 2005). A growing family form characterized by high rates of boundary ambiguity is cohabiting families (Brown and Manning 2009) which face unclear family roles and relationships (Nock 1995; Smock et al. 2005).

Therefore, it is not surprising that there are discrepancies in reports of membership in complex family structures (e.g., Buchanan et al. 1996; Brown and Manning 2009; Furstenberg 1987; Stewart 2005; White 1998). Stated differently, individuals define their families and consequently the reliability of our measures may be compromised. Family boundary ambiguity refers to the inconsistency in reporting who is in and out of the family (Boss 2007). The more complex the family form, the greater the family boundary ambiguity (Boss, 1980; Stewart, 2005). Family structure reports, particularly for complex families, are likely to depend in part on who is doing the reporting. Discrepancies may occur between siblings, partners, or the parent and child. Prior research also shows that boundary ambiguity is associated with less effective family functioning, greater conflict and stress, weaker family ties, poorer parenting processes, and lower relationship quality (Boss 2007; Brown and Manning 2009; Carroll et al. 2007; Ganong and Coleman 1994; Stewart 2005). This work calls into question the efficacy of our family structure measurement strategies.

Strategies to Measure Family Living Arrangements

The most common way to measure household or family structure is to draw on a household roster where the 'head' is the main respondent and relationships of all individuals to the 'head' are established. The respondent is asked how each member of the household is related to him/her. However, this approach does not accurately capture the relationships within the households, especially in households that are not composed of just two biological parents and their biological offspring. For example, two step-children may be in the household but it is unknown if they are full-siblings or half-siblings. A respondent may have a biological child present but the child is not biologically related to his/her spouse/partner resulting in an underestimate of stepfamilies. Estimates of stepfamilies from household roster data does not capture stepchildren of all household members, just the household head, and captures only two-thirds of stepchildren living with stepparent (Kreider 2008; Stewart 2007). Generally, the household roster works well for stable families where parents have not had children with other partners; however, the traditional two biological parent family with only biological children is becoming less common. There is strong consensus in the field that the household roster is no longer the appropriate method to establish family composition. The consensus is that the use of household roster data to measure stepfamilies is problematic (Stewart 2007). Accordingly, household roster approaches have been characterized as 'outmoded and should be replaced" (p.176) (Brandon 2007).

A supplement to the household roster is the use of "parent pointers," which allow the identification of the parents of all respondents in the household (Kreider 2008). This strategy has been employed in the Annual Social and Economic Supplement of the Current Population Survey data. While this represents an advance, the shortcoming with this approach is that it and does not describe how children are related to one another. For example, the parental pointers

allow us to establish that a married mother has two biological children in her home who are not related to her husband; however, it does not establish the relationship of the children to one another - they may be full-siblings or half-siblings. Furthermore, among single mothers this is especially problematic because it is unclear how the children are related to one another. This issue is becoming increasingly important with the increases in multiple partner fertility (Guzzo and Furstenberg 2007; Carlson and Furstenberg 2006), and the negative implications of multiple partner fertility on child well-being (Guzzo 2009).

A third strategy has been used to increase household members reporting by asking a randomly selected focal child whether he/she lives with their father, mother, stepmother, or stepfather. Using the Panel Study of Income Dynamics Child Development Survey, Hofferth and colleagues (1999) apply this method. This method is more cost-effective than selecting all children, but it is limited to one child's perspective. It also does not ask the child about relationships to all household members. By including data from more than one child, the proposed project will help to evaluate the potential bias this method introduces.

The fourth and most comprehensive strategy is household matrices. A household matrix is administered to the primary respondent and he/she identifies the relationships of each member of the household to one another. This permits the identification of relationships among all children and adults within a household. Brandon (2005) has shown that the SIPP household relationship matrix, is superior to standard household survey questions that indicate only the relationship of a child to a head of household. In the U.S., the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP) data are the primary data source relying on household matrices. In other nations, the matrices have been included in census data collections and have been recommended by the UN Economic Commission for Europe Statistical Division (2006) especially if there is an

interested in 'reconstituted' families. The matrices have been instituted in census data collected in several countries including Canada, Australia, Great Britain, Estonia, and New Zealand. Typically, a single "main" respondent is selected to provide information on the relationship of all household members to one another. Evidence from the household matrix data in the SIPP data indicate that in 2001 15% of children lived with a stepparent, stepsibling, or half-sibling (Kreider and Fields 2005), these estimates are not possible with traditional household roster data. However, the potential shortcoming to this approach is that it just represents one person's view of the family relationships. As discussed above the interpretation of family membership and relationships may depend upon who is asked the questions.

A limitation of the household matrix (as well as household rosters and parental pointers) is that it accounts for just children living in the household. However, families have become more fluid with children and adults moving across household boundaries and potentially members of several households (Seltzer 2000). To build a more comprehensive household matrix, we also ask about children who are not present in the household full-time but spend some time in the household. For example, a father's child from a prior relationship may spend every other weekend in the household but not live in the household full-time. Our questions will help to establish the maximum number of people who spend time in the household and examine the perspectives from multiple household members.

A final strategy often used in surveys is to include additional questions to assess further details about family relationships to provide a more accurate assessment of family structure. The key shortcoming of all of these methods (additional survey questions, parental pointers, household roster, and matrices) is that it is limited to just one person's view of the relationships in the home. Family structure may be perceived differently by each member of the family and

current data collections do not address this issue. Research recognizing variability in the definition of family structure depending upon who is interviewed is not new. Furstenberg's (1987) study shows that many individuals do not report stepfamily members when asked to list the people in their family. For example, 15% of parents did not report stepchildren who resided in the household (versus only 1% of parents who neglected to mention biological children). And, whereas about 7% of children failed to mention a biological mother or father, 31% of children did not include a residential stepparent in their family list. Children were also more likely to omit residential stepsiblings than biological siblings (41% compared to 19%). In their study of adolescents following parental divorce, Bunchanan, Maccoby, and Dornbusch (1996) encountered discrepancies in terms of the presence of new partners, the remarriage status (i.e., cohabiting versus married) of a parent, and the duration of the new relationship. Similarly, White (1998) found that children's reports of siblings are unreliable, particularly when step- and half-siblings are involved. Using data from the two waves of the NSFH, she calculated that about 16% of respondents over-reported and another 15% underreported their siblings. These discrepancies are largely attributable to the classification difficulties posed by complex family forms, including stepfamilies that involve the presence of step- and half-siblings.

A family type that may be even more heavily characterized by family membership discrepancies are cohabiting stepfamilies. Indeed, Stewart (2005) found discrepancy in stepparents' reports of their (and their partner's) children, was greater among cohabiting stepfamilies than married families (29 versus 11%). Brown and Manning (2009) find that 70% of mothers who report living in married stepparent family have a child who agrees and only one-third of mothers who report being in cohabiting stepfamily have a child who also reported living in a cohabiting stepfamily. Further, discrepancies in the definitions of family membership

influence parenting and family processes (Brown and Manning 2009). This work aligns with previous studies, which indicate that family membership varies according to the reporter (Furstenberg 1987). We expect that family members may have different perceptions of the family relationships among household members.

Along a similar vein, the family type categorization may depend on the unit of analysis. Depending on who is interviewed, the reporting of the composition of the family may differ. Consideration of just the child's perspective may indicate the family is a married two biological parent family, but taking the parent's perspective, a family could be categorized as a stepparent family. Balistreri et al., 2009 use the new parent pointers in the CPS to report that 8% of children living with two biological married parents are also living with stepsiblings, and 41% of children living with two biological cohabiting parents are living with stepsiblings. Thus, by definition from the child's perspective these are two biological parent families but from the parent's viewpoint these are stepfamilies. Thus, it may be important to assess family structure from both the parent and child's viewpoint.

There are only a few national data sources that ask parents and children about household membership (National Education Longitudinal Study, the High School and Beyond Survey, National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health- Add Health). Brown and Manning (2009) use the 1994-1995Add Health data to compare family structure reports of parents and adolescents. Thus, data a new collection will provide valuable insights into how a contemporary cohort of adolescents and parents define family membership.

DATA and METHODS

We use a web-based data collection to obtain information on the household composition from a parent and teenage child living in the household. The web-based approach is ideal as it permits flexibility based on household size and provides prompts for household member names. The

sample is drawn from the Knowledge Network panel. While the panel is nationally representative, our sample cannot be given the constraints of data from both a child and parent. The household matrices are similar to those used in the SIPP. In addition, to household membership and relationship we will also include questions on age, sex, part- or full-time in residence, and relationship closeness to each household member.

The data were collected between November 2011 and February 2012. We include 645 parent-child dyads in the final analytic sample. As we began to examine the data provided by Knowledge Networks (KN), it became clear that there were serious issues with respect to the household roster identification system used in the web-based survey design. More specifically, KN networks failed to provide members of each household with *unique* identification numbers for the adult and child surveys. To correct this error, we had to examine each household and hand-code the adult and child questionnaires with new identification numbers. We used a system of matching across adult and child surveys on age and gender to identify individual household members. For every household we generated a 'family map' which indicated how everyone was related to one another. We then entered the data in a manner we could use for analysis.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Among our sample of 645 adult – child pairs, roughly three quarters were composed of married couple families, 7% were cohabiting families and 17% were single parent families. The average age of the adult respondent was 44.2 years, and the average age of the child respondent was 12.5 years. The average household size was 4.1. Roughly 35% of the sample reported total household incomes less than $50,000, 38% reported incomes ranging from $50,000 to less than

$100,000 per year, the remaining 27% of the sample reported their total household income as over $100,000 per year.

Among the dyads, the reports on the relationship varied across mother-type, father-type, and sibling-type. For example, roughly 10% of the dyads expressed disagreement between the adult and child report identifying the type of mother or father (i.e., biological, adoptive, step, foster, or not related) or the type of sibling relationships (i.e., full, half, step, or not related). Preliminary analyses suggest that the level of disagreement on relationship type varies considerably within dyad by family structure type. For example, mother-type disagreement within dyads occurred 15% of the time among cohabiting households compared to 10% of the time among married couple households. For father-type, the level of disagreement was higher. Among cohabiting households, just 28% of adult and child respondents disagreed on the type of father (biological, step, foster, adoptive or not a father), compared with 8% of married-couple families. Sibling-type identification was in discord between the adult and child respondent in 23% of cohabiting couple households, compared with roughly 10% of single or married-couple households. Future analyses will examine key demographic characteristics associated with discordant identification of mother, father and sibling type, as well as measures of relationship closeness.

SUMMARY

The results from this project make a fundamental first step in determining the measurement of families that reflect the reality of family life. It improves on methods from other primary data collections to significantly advance the field of family measurement. High quality measurement

of family composition and relationships is critical for accurate assessments of family change and development of public policies and programs to meet children and families' needs.

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