

Measuring Family Structure and Instability: Emerging Trends and Challenges

Susan L. Brown
Professor of Sociology
Co-Director, NCFMR
Bowling Green State University

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 cohabitators
 - 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

Family Structure, Children Aged 0-17 in 2004	Percentage
Two Biological Married family	60.1
Two Biological Cohabiting family	2.5
Married Stepfamily	7.4
Cohabiting Stepfamily	2.7
Single Mother family	20.5
Single Father family	2.6
No Parent family	4.2
Total	100.0

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

	Baseline Report		
Follow-up Report	Married	Cohabiting	Single
Married	97%		
Cohabiting		89%	
Single			67%

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

Mother Reports	No Boundary Ambiguity (%)	Boundary Ambiguity (%)
Two bio	99.4	0.6
Single Mother	88.4	11.6
Married Step	69.8	30.2
Cohabiting Step	34.1	65.9

Source: Brown, Susan L. and Wendy D. Manning. 2009. "Family Boundary Ambiguity and the Measurement of Family Structure: The Significance of Cohabitation." *Demography* 46:85-101. (Adapted from Table 1, page 92)

Implications for Population Estimates of Family Structure

Family Structure	Adolescent	Mother	Combined
Two Bio Parents	62.0%	58.2%	57.9%
Single Mother	22.8	21.0	18.5
Married Step	12.4	15.6	10.9
Cohabiting Step	2.7	5.2	1.8
Boundary Ambiguity	---	---	10.9

Source: Brown, Susan L. and Wendy D. Manning. 2009. "Family Boundary Ambiguity and the Measurement of Family Structure: The Significance of Cohabitation." *Demography* 46:85-101. (Adapted from Table 2, page 94)

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