The Need for Nationally Representative Longitudinal Data for

Addressing Key Questions about Family Change

R. Kelly Raley
Department of Sociology &
Population Research Center
University of Texas

Abstract

The United States is undergoing rapid social change. The nation faces declines in stable family formation, related to growing income inequalities and stalled improvements in population health. This essay considers key questions about families in the United States and whether a new nationally representative panel study is necessary to answer these questions. It argues that current data systems are not well equipped to evaluate the potential sources of these changes over historical time. Most of our longitudinal data systems are designed to follow a single cohort as it ages. This provides an incomplete picture, one that ignores period context, because cohort studies confound period changes with aging. Comparisons across cohort studies can be helpful, but leave a wide gap in our knowledge. A new nationally representative panel study would fill that gap.

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In recent years in the United States, the needs of the economy increasingly diverge from distribution of worker skill sets, resulting in growing economic inequality and declines in upward mobility (Goldin and Katz 2008; Autor, Katz, and Kearney 2008). Advances in health have stagnated and even reversed among the least advantaged, and consequently the United States is falling behind other rich nations in life expectancy (Crimmins, Preston, and Cohen 2011).

Families and relationships are increasingly unstable, leading to more complicated families where the lines of responsibility are poorly defined and difficult to enforce. These concerns are interdependent. For example, changes in the family are correlated with growing economic inequality. As income inequality began to increase in the late 1970s, family patterns began to diverge by socioeconomic status, with the least advantaged experiencing the greatest declines in marriage and largest increases in single parenthood (Blau 1998; Ellwood and Jencks; McLanahan 2004). Decline in marriage (or in stable supportive relationships) is important in its own right. Most people prefer to marry and avoid divorce, not just because it makes them richer or healthier, although health and prosperity are important bonuses. But family change is also a social concern because of its importance for other aspects of well-being. Society asks a lot of families, particularly in terms of care of children and the elderly, and thus it is useful to identify when they are stretched beyond their limit and to identify ways to support them.

The aim of this essay is to identify key questions about family relationships and to evaluate whether a new nationally representative household panel survey would contribute meaningfully to our ability to answer these questions. The main observation is most of our data collection systems are either cross-sectional (e.g. the census) or follow a group of similarly-aged respondents (i.e. cohorts) over time. Combined, the cross-sectional studies enable us to describe population-level changes over time, but do not provide much insight into social process at the
individual or family level. The cohort studies provide information on the micro-level factors that contribute to healthy development, but are not as useful for describing or explaining changes at the population-level. Nationally representative panel data are necessary to address questions about the economic and other factors contributing to changes in family relationships and population health in the United States over time.

Key Questions about Families

Since the mid 20th C marriage has been increasingly delayed (Martin, Astone, and Peters 2014), rates of divorce have been rising (Kennedy and Ruggles 2014; Ruggles 1997), non-marital cohabitation is common, and an increasing proportion of births occurs to unmarried women (Hamilton et al. 2013). Consequently, families today are more unstable and their boundaries are more fluid. Whether we are concerned about these changes per se or about the implications of these changes for health and well-being, it is important that we be able to accurately describe family experiences across the life course. Many see statistics like the proportion of marriages that end in divorce or the proportion of children that experience a single parent family as relevant social barometers. Thus, the first key question is “How much family instability do children and adults experience?”

We have data to partially answer this question in the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), the American Community Survey (ACS), and the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG). All are cross-sectional population-representative data sources. The ACS asks about marital and fertility transitions in the last year and is designed to allow us to track changes in marriage and divorce rates over time, compensating for the lack of national-level vital statistics data on marital events since the mid-1990s. It is the largest of these three data sources and is the most useful resource for producing detailed trends by race-ethnicity, immigrant
generation, or educational attainment. Unfortunately, these questions are currently slated to be dropped from the ACS (U.S. Census 2014).

The SIPP and NSFG collect retrospective family histories, starting with the first marriage and childbirth. With this information we can describe children’s cumulative number of years lived with an unmarried mother or number of parental divorces experienced. Yet the SIPP cannot produce good measures of children’s experiences of family instability because it does not collect cohabitation histories. The NSFG has information on cohabitation and this can be useful in describing the early lives of children born to teenage and young-adult mothers. But because the NSFG includes women no older than 44, it cannot describe the experiences of children living with mothers over age 45 (Manning, this volume). Forty percent of births are to women over age 30 (Martin et al., 2013). If sufficiently large, a new population-representative household survey would allow us to describe family instability and to measure how this varies by socio-demographic characteristics. If it were longitudinal, it would allow us to examine changes over time.

Another key question is how social change (including family change) affects child and adolescent development (Sabol, Chase-Lansdale, Brooks-Gunn, this volume). Substantial evidence suggests that family structure and stability are associated with child well-being. Many have tried to determine whether this association is causal and what mechanisms connect family structure and stability to the well-being of children, as well as adults. Cohort studies (i.e., studies that follow a birth cohort over time) are essential for addressing these questions. Child development and educational attainment are topics that are especially well suited to a cohort design because these are highly age-graded processes. Having a sample concentrated at similar ages assists with understanding variability in the development of academic skills or transitions
into the labor force. To the extent that the effects of family structure on child development are stable across time, then we can answer questions about the consequences of growing family instability for child development, insofar as any observational data can.

If stable well-functioning families are important both as an end and as a means to other desirable ends, then research investigating the factors that facilitate stable family formation is essential. Do we have the data we need to investigate what structural and cultural factors contribute to family change? Cohort studies have been useful for studying the transition into cohabitation, marriage, and parenthood (not necessarily in that order). For example, the National Longitudinal Surveys (1979 and 1997) collect data annually or biennially on a cohort of men and women, beginning approximately when they are entering the labor force for the first time. These are a good source of data for studying how the transition out of school and into work is associated with union formation and dissolution, an important topic given growing socioeconomic inequalities in access to marriage.

Some cohort studies can also be useful for examining short-term period influences, such as the recession, on family formation. If all of the participants are the same age then it is impossible to separate age from period, but if the study follows a narrow range of ages, analysts can compare across respondents the same ages in the different years. To help illustrate Figure 1 depicts, in the wide diagonal bands, population coverage of two NLSY cohorts by year (x-axis) by age (y-axis). The more recent NLSY survey began in 1997 with a sample between age 12 and 16 and in 2015 is now exiting its twenties. Recession years are marked in vertical bands of grey. The oldest members of this cohort turned 26 in 2006 -- just before the recession, while the youngest turned 26 in 2010 -- as the economy was recovering. Comparing marriage the marriage
rates of 26 year-olds across years can give some insights into the effect of the recession, with one important caveat. One might misinterpret a decline in marriage rates as a recession effect when it could actually due to a longer-term decline.\(^1\) This observation calls attention to the weakness of a single cohort study for understanding trends across decades or generations. They do not provide a wide enough window to distinguish temporary shifts from broader, more persistent changes that cumulate across decades.

A comparison of data from two cohort studies can give us insight into long-term macro-level forces factors affecting marriage. For example, Sweeney (2002) compared data from the NLS7 1979 to earlier NLS cohorts to observe changes in the association between women’s economic prospects and their marriage rates. One might also be interested in whether changes in men’s employment opportunities help to explain growing educational differences in marriage rates. A comparison of the 1979 and 1997 NLSY could help address this question. Figure 1 shows that the NLSY 1979 cohort experienced its prime years for first marriage between 1979 and 1995. One could pool data from the 1979 and 1997 cohorts to estimate models with educational attainment predicting marriage, allowing the effect of education to vary between the two cohorts. Past research suggests that educational attainment should be positively associated with marriage and perhaps moreso today than in the past because of growing earnings and employment disparities across education groups. The models could then add employment characteristics to see whether these factors help to explain changes in the association between education and marriage.

A few issues complicate the interpretation of the results for understanding long-term growth in socioeconomic inequalities in access to marriage, or more broadly, the social and cultural influences contributing to family change. The factors that affect marriage vary by age. A

\(^1\) Thanks to David McClendon for this observation.
comparison of the 1979 and 1997 cohorts can tell us something about the social processes
shaping marriage between age 18 and 29, but because the NLSY cohort is still young, we are
unable to observe marriage at older ages. Many of the most socioeconomically privileged delay
marriage until their thirties. Once this cohort makes it into their thirties, these data will no longer
be able to provide information on cohabitation and marriage in early adulthood.

Another complication is that short-term period influences can obscure longer-term trends.
As mentioned above, the NLSY 1997 cohort experienced the recession during its late twenties.
This is the kind of shock that can be useful as a natural experiment, but it is not helpful to
understanding broader, cumulating social changes contributing to unequal access to marriage
because a decline in marriage rates could be due to either short-term or longer-term influences.
This is a particular problem for understanding educational differences in marriage because
among the 1997 NLSY cohort, the more highly educated were more likely than the less educated
to be entering the labor force during the recession. All of these issues can be addressed with a
population-representative panel study because they have data on successive cohorts allowing
analysts to separate aging from both long-term and short-term period change.

A final set of key questions involves intergenerational transfers. Families can be an
important source of care and support for aging adults and senior generations are an important
resource for younger adults and children. Changes in family structure and stability have made the
lines of intergenerational obligations less clear. What are the implications of growing rates of
divorce and shifting patterns of repartnering across the life-course for the care and support of the
elderly? And for transfers from grandparents to younger generations? The Health and Retirement
Survey (HRS) is a main source of data on aging and because the HRS does not have gaps
between cohorts, it has many advantages over the NLSY design. This allows us to disentangle
short-term and longer-term period influences from aging. Nonetheless, as Seltzer (this volume) explains, the HRS cannot evaluate how the transition into grandparenthood varies across socioeconomic groups because it does not include adults younger than age 50, some of whom are grandparents.

In fact, altogether our data systems do not even provide researchers with the basic tools to describe family processes in middle age. For example, we are unable currently to estimate patterns of repartnering after marital dissolution, how long couples wait to form new unions, whether they typically cohabit first, how this varies by age, and how it is changing over time. The SIPP and ACS include information on formal marital transitions, but not about cohabitation, which is common after divorce (Bumpass, Raley, and Sweet 1995; Manning, this volume). The NSFG collects cohabiting histories, but only up to age 44. As Seltzer (this volume) notes, we also cannot determine other basic parameters of family life in middle age like the percentage of grandparents caring for grandchildren, because we do not know the number of grandparents.

Family relationships, whether they are romantic partnerships or intergenerational ties, are important for healthy aging, a topic likely to be of growing importance in the future. The HRS is designed to analyze the predictors of aging, and to the extent that well-being at later ages is shaped by life course events that happen after age 50 or by experiences that are measured well retrospectively, the HRS provides the necessary data. Yet, previous research indicates that retrospective data on family relationships is sometimes not well reported. Cohabiting unions are omitted from retrospective accounts (Teitler et al. 2006; Hayford and Morgan 2008) and men’s fertility histories are not accurately reported in retrospective data (Joyner et al., 2012). Moreover, survey data cannot provide information about relationship quality in the past. To fully understand how social institutions shape the aging process, we need data from earlier in the life course. Such
data would also help us to understand whether the social supports that middle-aged adults anticipate will be available are actually available later in the life course.

Overall, current data systems are good for providing basic descriptions of changes in marriage, cohabitation, and the transition into parenthood among young adults. We are also well equipped to study developmental processes among children. Other important questions we are not well equipped to address, however. We have limited data to investigate social changes that underlie declines in marriage and growing rates of non-marital fertility, especially among less advantaged adults. Most of the data sources we have follow a birth cohort over time, making the analysis of social change difficult. Combining two cohort studies helps, but when these cohorts are widely spaced it is impossible to determine whether differences between the two cohorts are due to gradual, persisting changes or to temporary period influences. In addition, we are unable even to describe changes in patterns of family formation and dissolution in middle age because of gaps between the HRS and NSFG. Panel data are not necessary for describing family change, but they nonetheless can be useful for filling in where current statistical systems fall short. Furthermore, multi-cohort panel data are necessary to answer questions about how early life course experiences relate to later patterns of intergenerational exchange or how broader social changes, like the growing costs of higher education and the loss of pensions, limit the ability of families to respond to the needs of younger and older generations.

**What should a Nationally Representative Household Panel Study look like?**

Nationally Representative Household Panel Studies (NRHPS) help to address key questions that are unanswerable with cross-sectional and cohort data. When designing such a study, however, it is important to remember what kinds of questions it is uniquely positioned to answer and to prioritize content accordingly. Generally, cohort studies are a better approach to
the analysis of developmental processes that are highly age-graded, like educational attainment, child development, and the transition into adulthood. A NRHPS would likely spread its sample across a broad range of ages and thus might not be as good for this purpose (as implied by Sabol et al this volume). Nationally representative, or multi-cohort studies are better to study other phenomena that are not highly age graded like unemployment, divorce and remarriage, and residential mobility. They are also useful for evaluating the impact of broader social changes because they allow analysts to distinguish aging and short-term period fluctuations from longer-term change.

We already have an excellent population-based panel study collecting data across the life course in the Panel Survey of Income Dynamics (PSID). The PSID has many good qualities and for those interested in long-term consequences of early life events, especially those not well-reported retrospectively, it is an essential resource. Yet, starting a new panel study would have many important benefits. For one, the PSID began as a survey of households and this design may not be appropriate today. Households as unit of analysis makes sense when they typically persist for long periods of time, but as marriages and the relationships that produce children are increasingly unstable, the alignment between household and family has become poor. A new study would allow for a design better suited to the realities of family life today, where siblings are spread across households and fathers often do not reside with their children. It may make more sense to conceptualize the study as following a representative sample of individuals over time. Using such an approach one can collect information on ties to household and non-household members as these ties are important to both intergenerational and couple relationships (Tach and Cornwell, this volume; Seltzer, this volume). Recent research shows that the social networks of white newlyweds have more shared in their social networks than do black couples
(Jackson, Kennedy, Bradbury, and Karney 2014). These differences in social ties might help to explain the greater instability of black marriages.

A new study would also incorporate populations that migrated to the United States since the PSID sample was drawn. To take full advantage of a more ethnically diverse sample, a new panel study will need to be larger. A recurring problem for many researchers using the PSID is that the sample size is so small that it cannot provide much information about how social processes vary across sub-populations. The PSID started with a sample from roughly 5,000 households and 18,000 individuals (McGonagle, Schoeni, Sastry, and Freedman 2012), small compared to the United Kingdom’s Understanding Society study which began with about 40,000 households. One possibility would be to combine a new, large, population representative sample with the existing sample of PSID respondents in a newly designed study.

Broad changes in the economy that have contributed to growing differences in family relationships and health by educational attainment have important implications for the future of this country. Cohort studies can provide some useful insights about social processes at the micro-level, but the current emphasis in social science research on cohort studies puts us in a poor position for understanding social change. Research on family change demonstrates that the factors that help to explain variation at a single point in time are not necessarily useful for explaining change over time (Ellwood and Jencks 2004). A new Nationally Representative Household Panel Survey would provide unique opportunities to understand the interdependencies across family, economy, health and how these are changing over time.
References


Figure 1. Population Coverage by age and period of the NLSY 1979 and 1997.