

Title: Implications of Alternative Definitions of “Family”

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Abstract:

The traditional definition of the family used in most censuses and surveys – persons related by blood, marriage, or adoption and living in the same residence – limits the description and analysis of family structure. We use the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study to develop alternative definitions of “family” and assess differences in describing family structure.

Three definitions are employed – the traditional definition, one that also includes cohabiting adults and their children living in the same residence, and one that includes all of the above people irrespective of residence. We find significant differences in family size and composition across the three definitions and by stages in the life cycle. These findings have implications for interpretation of group variations and time trends in family structure and size.

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Research Issue: The traditional definition of a “family” used most frequently in social science research is not necessarily in accord with contemporary views of family life. This traditional definition results from use of a household basis for census or survey enumerations and from the view that families are composed of persons in the same residence who are related by “blood, marriage, or adoption.” As a result, the definition excludes family members not residing in the same housing unit, and discounts cohabiting couples (even those with children).

It is generally assumed today that the modern family has undergone significant transformations in its structure. Research indicates that societal changes have contributed to a sharp reduction in traditional “nuclear” families and a concomitant rise in childless families, single-parent families, other family configurations, and family units based on cohabitation rather than marriage. However, little research has been conducted to determine whether shifts in family size, composition and residence patterns have affected the functioning of the family as a social institution. We contend that analysis of changing family patterns is distorted by the definition of the family that is generally used and the way relevant data are collected. We use kinship survey data sources to examine alternative family definitions and their consequences for describing and analyzing some important dimensions of family life.

Methodology and Data: We employ the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS) to classify nuclear families according to three different definitions of “family.” We only consider the relationships of adults and their children (not grandparents, grandchildren, siblings, etc.). The traditional family definition includes only those people related by blood, marriage, or adoption and residing in the same residence. The second definition also includes adults related by cohabitation and any children of cohabiting partners who are also living in the residence. The third definition includes people with all of the above relationships, irrespective of residence. The data are analyzed in terms of family size and composition, by current family structure and age category of household head. Disparities in these measures across the three different definitions of family are noted and analyzed.

Outcomes: Disparities in family size and composition across the different family definitions are significant, particularly for respondents living without children in the home and for those in the older age categories (46-60 & 60+). Measuring family characteristics with a broader definition of family (definition #3) allows us to capture a greater number of family members and more accurately determine the age composition and general proximity of related adults and their children. Thus, the definition chosen when conducting family-related research makes a significant difference when describing family characteristics. These findings may have important implications for how we discuss trends in family change and for the overall usefulness of measures derived from the traditional family definition.

Future plans include extending this line of research by adding definitions based on more extended family forms (e.g. grandparents, grandchildren, siblings) and by examining

differences in family characteristics (e.g. socioeconomic) and functioning (e.g. family interaction and intergenerational assistance) across the various family definitions.

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