

Diverse Family Forms and Children's Well-Being

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Abstract

The relationship between family structure and children's well-being has been the subject of an extensive body of family scholarship that continues to grow. Amidst the worldwide diversification of families, scholars have grappled with how to make sense of the emergence and proliferation of "alternative" family forms—those differing from the "traditional families," or what has been referred to as the Standard North American Family. This essay explores the literature on several of these alternative family forms, focusing on including single-parent, stepparent, and cohabiting families, older-parent families, adoptive families, same-sex families, and multiracial families. The authors next identify six key areas for social scientists to consider when assessing the implications of diversifying family structures for children.

INTRODUCTION

Were you to enter "family" into an online search engine, the resulting images would likely be of young, heterosexual, monoracial couples, and their children. This depiction of family is so ubiquitous that it is the predominant image even if one specifies the country (although occasionally a grandparent is present). This prototypical image is what sociologist Dorothy Smith termed the Standard North American Family, or SNAF (Smith, 1993).

Despite the persistence of this "traditional" image of family in much of the world, the SNAF has reduced in number during the past few decades as a range of other family forms have increased: single-parent families, stepparent families, cohabiting families, families with older parents, same-sex families with children, multiracial families, and adoptive families. These emerging family structures—those that do not meet one or more criteria for the SNAF—have been referred to as alternative, atypical, nontraditional, postmodern, or transgressive family structures (Fine, 1992). Today, SNAFs represent less than half (40%) of American households (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2017), and even a smaller proportion of households outside the

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United States. Despite institutional reluctance to embrace these changing family forms, evidence suggests that a return to the SNAF is unlikely.

A key component of the SNAF is the presence of children. Worldwide, household size has decreased, and with it, a smaller share of households includes children. In much of the Western world, households with children are at a historic low. Although we acknowledge that families need not require the inclusion of children, this essay focuses on children's well-being and family structure means that we exclude the burgeoning literature on families without children.

Children's living arrangements have become increasingly diverse and complex. In the United States, most children live with two married parents, but single-parenting and stepparenting have more than doubled over the last 50 years (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2017). Demographic information on older-parent families, same-sex families, interracial families, and adoptive families are somewhat harder to discern, as they have until recently been excluded from official counts. Yet, other sources suggest a rising prevalence of these family forms as well.

Because family structure is linked to child well-being, a substantial body of research is dedicated to comparing child outcomes in various family forms. Some scholars have approached research on alternative families from the premise that SNAFs produce children with greater well-being and higher academic outcomes than their peers in alternative family structures, and some empirical evidence ostensibly supports this characterization: broad comparisons between children residing in SNAF homes and those diverging characterize the latter as having slightly lower levels of well-being (Brown, 2010). But these comparisons mask the diversity of alternative families, both in terms of the nature of parents' relationships to their children and the demographic composition of the family form. In fact, some studies suggest even more favorable child outcomes from alternative family forms than from SNAFs. Understanding the mechanisms driving these outcomes requires viewing family characteristics in social context—an approach that is missing from much of the existing research on family forms and children's well-being.

In this brief essay, we explore recent literature on some alternative family forms. Then, we identify six key issues that future family researchers should consider when examining the relationship between family structure and children's well-being.

ALTERNATIVE FAMILY FORMS

Despite the expansion of the diverse family forms mentioned earlier, most research on families with children still privileges and studies SNAFs. All too

frequently, alternative family structures are excluded from analyses, categorized with other families according to marital status, or inserted as control variables rather than as variables of interest. Through these analyses, it often is difficult to determine what is unique about family forms differing from the SNAF and how they might matter for children.

A relatively smaller but important body of scholarship explicitly examines alternative families with children. Articles on divorced and single-parent families dominate, followed by stepparents and cohabiting families. Some less-explored families include older-parent families, adoptive families, multiracial families, and same-sex parents. That said, literature on these families recently has grown, and there is little reason to believe that the increase will not continue. Before moving forward, we must note that the family forms explored in this essay are not an exhaustive list of the family forms, but rather several we see as promising future areas of scholarship.

SINGLE-PARENT, STEPPARENT, AND COHABITING FAMILIES

One of the most notable changes in family structure in the past few decades is the rapid increase in the number of single-parent, stepparent, and cohabiting (unmarried) families in the United States. Multiple factors contributed to the growth of these family forms in contemporary times: among them, changing social, cultural, and economic trends; increased divorce rates; changing employment opportunities for men and women; and increased rates of non-marital childbearing. With these changes, more children may be transitioning across multiple living arrangements during the course of their childhood (Raley & Wildsmith, 2004).

The effects of single-parent and cohabiting parent family life on children often fall into two categories: (i) those attributed to the lower socioeconomic status (SES) of single or cohabiting parents and (ii) for children who come from divorced households, the short-term consequences of divorce that moderate over time. Studies often report that children in these family forms tend to fare less well than those in SNAFs across several domains of child outcomes (e.g., cognitive, behavioral, physical, and mental health) (Fomby & Cherlin, 2007).

These findings have led some scholars to conclude that SNAF are intrinsically the most effective family form, and have been cited as evidence of the "breakdown" of the family (Popenoe, 1999). Other scholars counter that single-parent, stepparent, and cohabiting families have existed in all societies across time and should be viewed as alternative family forms rather than as incomplete ones (Coontz, 2006).

OLDER “PARENT” FAMILIES

Older “parent” families encompass multiple distinct family structures, including three-generational households, children being raised primarily by grandparents (i.e., skipped-generation households), and families with parents of advanced age. Climbing steadily alongside other alternative family forms, multigenerational families accelerated in the crack cocaine epidemic of the late 1980s and again during the economic downturn of the late 2000s (Hayslip & Kaminski, 2005). Three-generational families most commonly form in response to economic pressures, health difficulties, and reduced welfare support for families, while skipped-generation families are frequently a result of parents’ financial, physiological, or physical inability to care for children (Scommegna, 2012). Such families are more likely to have lower SES and are more prevalent among racial/ethnic minorities.

The number of children with mothers that would be classified as “older” has been trending upward for all races/ethnicities. Factors contributing to the rise in older parents include the rise of effective contraception, increases in women’s education and labor market participation, and a weakening of cultural expectations of marriage and early childbearing. In turn, older parents (both mothers and fathers) are most likely to be better educated, married, and more financially stable than younger parents (Taylor *et al.*, 2010).

The research on children’s outcomes in multigenerational families is limited, but what does exist suggests emotional and behavioral problems for those living with custodial grandparents (Smith & Palmieri, 2007). Important to note is that challenging family environments often lead to custodial grandparent care, so it may be less about family structure than about the circumstances leading to that structure. Still, others suggest positive effects of grandparent care for the cognitive development of infants and toddlers (Sun & Li, 2014). The benefits of older parents are clearer, in terms of the provision of economic, social, and cultural resources to children (Powell, Steelman, & Carini, 2006). Older parents confer advantages to children that set them apart from their younger parent peers.

ADOPTIVE FAMILIES

Children come into adoptive families through one of several routes: stepparent adoptions, adoptions through the child welfare (or foster) system, adoptions through private domestic agencies, and adoptions from other countries. In the United States, international adoptions peaked in 2004 but have steadily declined since due to newly imposed legal restrictions. The adopted children are increasingly racial and ethnic minorities and brought into adoptive families of a different race, culture, or ethnicity.

Adoptive parents may be genetically related to children (e.g., grandfather, aunt) or outside the biological family, and this distinction poses a challenge to scholars attempting to draw generalizations about the effects of adoptive family structures on children. Individuals who adopt extended kin are disproportionately of lower SES and from racial minorities and are bringing children into homes with similar characteristics as their birth parents. In contrast, those adopting outside of family ties more likely are of higher SES and white and are older than the average American parent (Hamilton, Cheng, & Powell, 2007). Most privileged are international adopters, due to the expensive, bureaucratic, and time-consuming process of adopting overseas. Yet children entering these families have the unique challenge of adjusting to often extreme cultural differences and are likely to be a different race or ethnicity than their adoptive parents (Samuels, 2009). Categorized together, adoptive families appear to produce children with lower levels of education and higher incidence of behavior problems. However, a closer look of the specific types of adoptive parents confirms a distinct advantage of being raised by nonrelative adoptive families emerges (Hamilton *et al.*, 2007).

SAME-SEX PARENTS

The expansion of same-sex legal rights and increasing public acceptance of same-sex couples have implications for the growth of same-sex parent families in much of the Western world. In recent years, adoption and advances in reproductive technologies (i.e., artificial insemination and surrogacy) have increased the options for same-sex couples to become parents. Yet while the proportion of same-sex adoptive parents has rapidly grown, this increase has been overshadowed by the decrease of same-sex families with children overall. This decrease likely can be attributed to (i) more gay and lesbian individuals coming out earlier in life and (ii) the few gay and lesbian individuals being in heterosexual relationships and having children from these heterosexual relationships before coming out later. Concurrently, the legalization of same-sex marriage also has changed the landscape for these families, who previously could only raise children in a cohabiting relationship. In addition, public approval toward same-sex families has rapidly grown (Powell, Bolzendahl, Geist, & Steelman, 2010). All in all, the landscape for same-sex families has changed dramatically and overall in a positive direction.

In the United States, same-sex couples are more likely to be interracial, racial, and ethnic minorities, younger, and with lower levels of education and higher levels of poverty than their different-sex counterparts. Looking only at adoptive same-sex parents presents a different story, as these couples are twice as likely to be white, more educated, and older than the average parent (Gates, 2015).

With few exceptions (Regnerus, 2012; but see Cheng & Powell, 2015 and Rosenfeld, 2015), most literature on same-sex parent families finds little evidence that such structures produce negative effects on children. Findings of no difference exist across a number of child outcomes (e.g., academic performance, cognitive development, social and mental health). In fact, some research on same-sex (and two-mother, in particular) households suggests more favorable outcomes than in SNAFs, although additional research is needed to confirm this (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010). One likely mechanism for these favorable outcomes include the intentionality (and expense) of creating families through adoption or reproductive technologies that, in turn, build investment in children. Another is the idea that same-sex parents compensate for real or perceived social and legal obstacles by investing more heavily in their children's well-being.

MULTIRACIAL FAMILIES

Changing laws and growing public acceptance of interracial relationships/partnering have translated into the rapid growth of multiracial children. In the United States, 4% of all children identify as multiracial; of these, black/white (36%) and Asian/white (24%) parents are most common (Parker, Morin, Horowitz, Lopez, & Rohal, 2015).

Although some theoretical work has posited negative consequences of living in interracial households, empirical research does not support the assumption that multiracial children fare worse than their monoracial peers. In fact, some biracial family combinations offer greater parental resources than their monoracial peers, although whether those resources render actual advantages is less known. As in adoptive and same-sex families, higher rates of parental investment in interracial families may reflect a compensatory mechanism guarding against social stigma and marginalization (Cheng & Powell, 2007).

KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Although scholarship on alternative families is growing, a great deal of work lies ahead. Several promising areas are suggested as follows.

DECENTERING THE STANDARD NORTH AMERICAN FAMILY (SNAF)

One of the most encouraging developments on the literature on families with children has been attention to alternative family forms. However, the research on children too often assesses alternative family forms by comparing them with the SNAF. This comparison may provide useful

information but is incomplete in that it does not compare across the different forms. This comparison also may, although not intentionally, reinforce the idea that the SNAF is the standard against which other family forms should be evaluated. Scholarship that compares alternative family forms not only with SNAF but with each other is promising since it offers an opportunity to critically assess assumptions about the reputed inferiority of alternative family forms. There are many commonalities and differences among a broad array of alternative families. Better understanding these commonalities and differences can contribute to a richer appreciation of how and the extent to which extant family forms matter.

BROADENING THE DEFINITION OF ALTERNATIVE FAMILY TYPES

A second concern is the disproportionate focus on some alternative family forms over others. Single-parent, stepparent, and cohabiting families have received most of the attention in alternative family literature, whereas the literature on older-parent, adoptive, same-sex, and multiracial households is considerably scarcer. Despite the rapid growth of interracial marriage (Wang, 2012), for example, a recent review identified only six articles focusing on multiracial families (Powell, Hamilton, Manago, & Cheng, 2016). Similarly, despite a well-documented rising age at first birth, scholarship on older parents has remained stagnant. Increasing attention to these other forms better enables us to compare across the array of alternative family types.

This imbalance of research on alternative family forms is attributable in part to the availability or unavailability of accessible data on these populations. National government data have been inconsistent at best in its identification of some family structures, and in turn, researchers have had to draw from various sources and/or use sophisticated, but often imperfect, inferential techniques to create their samples. This can create inconsistencies in estimation; for example, estimates on the number of children in same-sex households vary widely—from 220,000, according the American Community Survey, to approximately 6 million, according to the Williams Institute (Gates, 2015). A growing body of qualitative studies contributes to the social scientific understandings of alternative family forms but is less useful in identifying generalizable patterns to compare to other family types. Access to quality, representative family data are crucial to identifying and disentangling factors that shape children's outcomes.

The difference in research coverage to various alternative family forms is consequential because there is strong evidence to suggest an advantage to children living in some of these alternative family forms. As noted earlier, many older parents, adoptive parents, same-sex parents, and interracial parents confer higher investments in their children than their SNAF

counterparts. These findings offer compelling counterevidence to claims that divergence from SNAFs carries costs for children.

BASING FAMILY THEORY ON A RICHER ARRAY OF FAMILY FORMS

Powell *et al.* (2016) describe four general frameworks that have shaped the discourse on the relationship between family structures and children's well-being: (i) family structure, (ii) evolutionary, (iii) characteristics, and (iv) context. *Family structure* theories argue that SNAF families create the most favorable outcomes for children and that those diverging are flawed. Justified by empirical findings showing lower transmission of parental resources and worse outcomes for children in single- and stepparent family households than SNAF ones, family structure theorists have extended their conclusions to all alternative family forms—a generalization that is not supported by the literature on those particular family forms.

Evolutionary frameworks similarly conclude that traditional family structures produce the most advantaged children. Evolutionary scholars discuss parental investment in terms of reproductive survival and often point to studies that indicate that stepparents invest lower in nonbiological kin. Evolutionary scholar often extends this logic to other family structures where biological ties are absent.

In contrast, *characteristics* frameworks focus not on family structures themselves but on the sociodemographic features creating inequality in children's outcomes. For example, focusing on the lower SES of single-parent families shaping children's trajectories challenges notions that it is single parenthood per se that produces negative outcomes for children.

Finally, *context* theorists view family characteristics through the lens of the social, legal, political, economic, and cultural climate surrounding them.

Returning to the example of single-parent families, international comparisons of children in single-parent families conclude that national family policies can offset potential negative outcomes of single parenthood (Pong, Dronkers, & Hampden-Thompson, 2003).

Recent empirical research on alternative family forms favors characteristics and contexts approaches, which emphasize the indirect effects of family forms on children's outcomes. Research documenting the higher parental investments of older, adoptive, interracial, and same-sex parents run counter to family structure and evolutionary assumptions that SNAF families provide the optimal environment for children. When associated with higher parental SES or resources, alternative families can offer children benefits equal to or great than benefits provided by their SNAF counterparts. When associated with lower SES or resources, they can reduce benefits. Emphasizing both characteristics and the broader legal, cultural, and social

contexts in which families live may give us a more complete picture of whether, how, and to what extent family structure matters.

EXPLORING HETEROGENEITY WITHIN FAMILY TYPES

A further direction is to explore heterogeneity within family types. As the earlier review demonstrates, bifurcations within family structures complicate attempts to draw conclusions about certain family structures. For example, generalizing about “older” parent families is challenging because families headed by parents of advanced age tend to be economically privileged and provide educational benefits that typically less advantaged grandfamilies cannot. Same-sex adoptive families similarly impart different educational benefits to their children than those provided by other same-sex families.

Beyond the diverging patterns within family structure categories, families may be any combination of the types discussed in the review mentioned earlier (among them, adoptive, multiracial, cohabiting, older, and same-sex) and may be advantaged in some ways but not in others. International adoptive parents, for example, may be more economically privileged than other adoptive parents but are more likely to face challenges arising from raising a child of a different race or ethnicity. Research on grandfamilies suggests that children benefit from the stability of grandparents, but that it may come at the cost of poorer physical and mental health for grandparents themselves (Hayslip & Kaminski, 2005). Greater attention to family characteristics, intersectionality, and the contexts in which families are embedded is needed for a clearer picture of the relationship between family structure and children's outcomes.

EXTENDING ANALYSES OVER TIME

Social scientists often have advocated for longitudinal research that can evaluate the long-term effects of family structure and parental investment on children. Little is known, for example, about whether the high levels of educational investment from older, adoptive, same-sex, and interracial parents translate into benefits for children in postsecondary education and as adults. Do challenges from alternative structures reflect periods of adjustment, as some literature on divorce and remarriage suggests, or are there long-term effects associated with structures themselves? Furthermore, given the changing cultural and legal climates regarding family structures, a longitudinal lens might assist us in distinguishing cohort effects from structural effects. For example, does the widening public acceptance of same-sex families (Powell *et al.*, 2010) affect the potentially compensatory investments of same-sex parents? Will attempts to increase or scale back

legal protections to same-sex couples and families affect the outcomes of children in these families?

CONSIDERATION OF NON-WESTERN EXPERIENCES

Finally, research on alternative family forms should extend beyond its persistent focus on European and North American families. Many of the trends in family structure have been near-universal—for example, the rising age of marriage and childbearing, divorce, and declining fertility (U.N., 2018). On the other hand, country- or region-specific socioeconomic, cultural, and political factors shape family structure and composition in ways that are less generalizable. These differences lend themselves to characteristics and contexts frameworks that attempt to identify the ways in which economic and social trends and policies affects and are affected by changes within families.

CONCLUSION

The question of how family structure affects children’s well-being continues to engage family scholars. With the increasing diversification of family forms, this question has become more complicated, but also more exciting, to answer. As families evolve, so too must the theoretical and analytical tools we use to study them. Special attention must be paid to the many changing contexts in which families are embedded, as well as other indirect factors that are mechanisms driving inequalities in children’s outcomes. Of course, these goals may be optimally reached with nationally representative data that pay attention to the alternative family structures described here.

In this article, we suggested six directions that can extend our knowledge of family structure and children’s well-being. Deprivileging the traditional, or SNAF family, is crucial for exploring commonalities and differences in alternative family structures that might affect children. Building the literature on underrepresented family types also can facilitate the identification of factors shaping children’s outcomes. Such approaches, in turn, move away from theories treating the SNAF as the optimal environment for children, and more toward those attuned to the indirect effects of family structure. Attention to the intersectional, contextual, and fluid aspects of families, combined with a longitudinal lens, can give a more complete picture of where families are currently and possibly where they are headed.

Discussions of children’s well-being often are tied to politics, and the research family scholars do on alternate family forms has consequences for real families. Policy often is based on information, or the lack thereof, and the theoretical frameworks and data family scholars use have the potential for either reducing or reproducing existing family inequalities.

Research that pays careful attention to the forces shaping family difference can demonstrate that nontraditional families can facilitate beneficial environments for children.

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