

## Household Types and Relationships in Six Race/Ethnic Groups: Conceptual and Methodological Issues

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### INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

Household structure has changed dramatically in the last 40 or so years. In the 1960s, the modal household type in this country was “married couple with children.” The television shows of that time, “Ozzie and Harriet” and “Leave it to Beaver,” consisted of children living with both of their biological parents who were formally married to each other. These are commonly referred to as “nuclear families.” Nuclear families represent part of the more generic “married couple with children” type of family household. In 1960, 44% of all households were classified as “married couple with children” and slightly over 30% more were comprised of “married couples without children” (Lugaila 1992).

Household structure has been changing and diversifying since the 1960s, as a result of factors such as: increases in divorce until 1980 or so; increases in remarriages, blended families and cohabiting couples (Casper and Bianchi 2002), and children living with them (Simmons and O’Connell 2003); and increases in grandparent-maintained households (Casper and Bryson 1998) and nonrelative households. There have also been increases in immigration and changing migration streams now coming predominantly from Latin America and Asia (Schmidley 2003). Foreign-born immigrants from non-European areas may be more likely to form non-traditional complex households consistent with cultural values in their home countries and/or due to

economic exigencies as recent immigrants.

As a result of these and other trends, over the forty years from 1960 to 2000, the “married couple with children” household type fell from 44% (Lugaila 1992) to just 24% (Fields and Casper 2001) of all civilian households, according to Current Population Survey data. In 2000, “married couple with no children” comprised just under 29% of all households (Fields and Casper 2001), supplanting the Ozzie and Harriet and other types of “married couple with children” households as the modal pattern. Questions can be raised as to whether the nuclear family type of household was, or is, the modal pattern for some ethnic minority subpopulations.

Complex, non-nuclear households are of interest to the Census Bureau for several reasons. First, prior research has shown them to be a barrier to complete and accurate enumeration (de la Puente 1993; Martin and de la Puente 1993; Year 2000 Research and Development Staff 1992; 2010 Planning Staff: Planning, Research and Evaluation Division 1999; Hainer et al. 1987; Shapiro, Diffendal and Cantor 1993). Second, there is evidence that at least one type of complex household is more common in ethnic minority subpopulations than among non-Hispanic whites—9.5% of non-Hispanic white households in the U.S. include at least one nonrelative, compared to 12.3% for African American, and 17.9% for Latino, households (Schwede and Blumberg forthcoming)—and minorities have been persistently undercounted in censuses for at least 50 years (Robinson, Ahmed, Gupta, and Woodrow 1993). Third, most ethnic subpopulations have had and continue to have higher growth rates than whites (U.S. Census Bureau Press Release 2004), with projections showing that by 2050, non-Hispanic whites will fall from about 70% of the population in 2003 to just over 50% in 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau 2003). Studying complex ethnic households may suggest methods for improving census coverage of some undercounted groups that are growing faster than the average rate for the whole population.

To learn more about complex households and how we might improve enumeration of them, the Census Bureau funded an integrated set of exploratory ethnographic studies in six race/ethnic groups in 2000 (Schwede 2003, Schwede et al. 2000).

These six groups cover five of the six race and ethnic categories mandated for federal surveys by the Office of Management and Budget. Asians were represented by Korean immigrants in Queens, New York (Kang 2001);

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African Americans by blacks in urban, coastal Virginia (Holmes and Amisssah 2002); whites by rural non-Hispanic whites in upstate New York (Hewner 2000); American Indians and Alaska Natives by Navajos on the Navajo reservation (Tongue 2000) and Inupiaq<sup>2</sup> Eskimo in northern Alaska (Craver 2001); and Latinos by Latino immigrants in central Virginia (Blumberg and Goerman 2000).

The purpose of this paper is to identify and discuss three major themes crosscutting these qualitative ethnic studies that have implications for the quality of survey and census data on household and family types in this country: 1) conceptual differences in the definition of the key concept, "household"; 2) cultural, linguistic, and nationality differences with relationships and household types; and 3) methodological issues with the relationship question and the household type variable. These themes are relevant for international surveys too. Suggestions will be made for changes in the method of collecting relationship data and for an expanded list of relationship terms to better reflect growing diversity.

#### DEFINITION AND METHODS

"Complex household" is a research category, not an official Census Bureau category. We defined a "complex household" as one with persons other than, or in addition to, nuclear family relatives (married couple with their own biological children), including: nonrelatives, like unmarried partners and roommates; more distant relatives not listed in the relationship question categories, such as niece, aunt, cousin, brother-in-law, and grandparent; persons shared across households, such as children in joint custody arrangements and persons tenuously attached to more than one residence; one nuclear family plus any other person; and more than one coresident family.

Data used in this analysis come from the integrated set of exploratory ethnographic studies in six U.S. race/ethnic groups conducted by experienced contract ethnographers already immersed in the race/ethnic communities which they studied. We asked them to conduct exploratory ethnographic interviews in their ethnic communities, using the same methods and the same core questions at the same time in the spring of 2000. Ethnographers each purposively chose 25 complex households that they thought represented the range of complex households in the ethnic communities in which they were immersed. At the beginning of the interview, the ethnographers asked respondents to

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<sup>2</sup> The spelling for this ethnic group's name is context-dependent: Inupiaq Eskimo, or the Inupiat.

complete a mock census form and observed how they completed the forms (Korean and Latino immigrants were given census forms in their own languages, and also interviewed in those languages). Ethnographers then conducted semi-structured interviews and open-ended probing, using a core protocol developed by Census Bureau staff and add-on questions of interest to each ethnographer. In 2002, a new African American study was done due to methodological issues with the first study.

#### RESULTS

In the overall study, we identified five cross-cutting themes that have implications for the quality of survey and census data on household and family types in this country (Schwede 2003). Three of these will be discussed in this paper.<sup>3</sup>

##### 1. Conceptual differences in the definition and application of the key concept, "household"

The first theme crosscutting these qualitative ethnic studies is a conceptual difference in the definition and application of a key demographic concept, "household." We found a mismatch between the census definition of "household" and the definitions of some Navajo, Inupiat, and African Americans that might lead to miscounting and misclassification of household types. In the census, a household is basically defined as all of the persons sharing one housing unit. This is because the sampling frame draws households from addresses of physical units (there is no frame for family units to use for sampling). As a result, the number of households equals the number of occupied housing units.

In this study, we found that some Navajo, Inupiat and African Americans do not identify households solely in terms of the census criterion of shared physical structure, but rather on the basis of the extent and depth of social interaction. Sharing of domestic functions, such as earning and pooling income, cooperating in subsistence activities, cooking, and child care, is an important component in defining one's household. Emotional closeness is a second key component in deciding who is part of one's household, regardless of

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<sup>3</sup> The other two cross-cutting themes identified in the overall project report (Schwede 2003) were 1) mobility patterns and respondents' conceptions of who is a household member that may not match the fundamental census residence rule concept of "usual residence," and 2) fear and mistrust of the government and pledges of confidentiality.

whether the person(s) coreside in one housing unit.

As a result of respondents defining households based on social interaction patterns, rather than just coresidence within a housing unit, the ethnographers document “households without walls” where persons from more than one housing unit identify themselves as one household. We also found the converse: people sharing one housing unit who consider themselves to be separate households. Thus, the *physical household*—those sharing one housing unit—may not have the same composition as the *social household*, based primarily on kinship, ownership and cooperation (Gerber 1994), and both of these may differ from the *economic household* of interest to economists (see also Netting, Wilk, and Arnould 1984 on the complexity of defining “household” in different cultures). Also, in contrast to the situation with “physical households,” the number of “social households” does not necessarily equal the number of occupied housing units. The implication is that respondents are likely to use their own culturally-defined criteria to decide whom to include as a household member in censuses and surveys, and may ignore residence rules specifying who should and should not be counted. This may be a factor in differential coverage errors for the census. It may also be a factor in misclassification of household type for some households in different race/ethnic groups in censuses and surveys in the U.S., and in international surveys. An in-depth discussion of cultural definitions of “household” and “family” in the six ethnic groups is found in Schwede, Blumberg, and Chan (forthcoming).

## 2. Cultural, linguistic and nationality differences with census concepts, methods and procedures

The second crosscutting theme in our ethnographic studies was the identification of cultural, linguistic, and nationality differences with census concepts, methods, and procedures. These differences should be identified, explored, and taken into account when developing forms, methods, training, and procedures.

The first of these is the naming customs of Spanish-speaking cultures. Each Latino person has two last names: the name of one’s father (the principal surname) followed by the name of one’s mother. For example, Juan Rodriguez Perales would be called Mr. Rodriguez. There is more variation for Latinas: some continue to use their father’s name as their principal surname, while others may add their husband’s name, preceded by “de.” If Ana Garcia Fernandez married Juan Rodriguez Perales, her name would become Ana Garcia Fernandez de Rodriguez, and she might call herself Ms. Garcia, Ms. Garcia de Rodriguez, or Mrs. Rodriguez. The child would use both of his parents’ fathers’ names: Miguel

Rodriguez Garcia. This may result in the mother, father, and child all having different surnames on a census form. There is not enough space on the census form name line for Latinos to record their full names; respondents may vary in which name they record in different data collections. These differences in naming customs and how they may not be consistently applied on census forms may lead to difficulties and errors in matching Latinos in reinterviews and coverage evaluations. If matching rates in census coverage evaluations for Latinos and non-Latinos differ, this might be a contributing factor.

The second cultural factor was related to differences between the Navajo matrilineal kinship system and kin terms and the census form relationship categories. The census form categories come out of the bilateral kinship system predominant in America that does not distinguish relatives on the mother’s side from those on the father’s side. In their matrilineal system, the Navajo do distinguish between relatives on the female side, called *nali*, and those on the father’s side, *tsui*. The bilateral category, “grandchild,” for example, is insufficient for the Navajo, who need to go a step farther and specify if the grandchild is on the maternal or paternal side. Ethnographer Tongue says that when “grandchild” alone was marked by Navajos in her study, it invariably meant the grandchild of one’s daughter, not one’s son. This may lead to differential misclassification of paternal kin relationships.

The third cultural factor is the longstanding Inupiaq custom of formally or informally adopting their own grandchildren. Sixty percent of the Inupiaq households in this study had informally or formally adopted children; 40 percent were grandparents. As a result, the relationship categories, which are generally assumed to be mutually exclusive, are not mutually exclusive for the Inupiat; they can mark either “grandchild” or “adopted child.” If an Inupiaq person marks “grandchild,” the true skip generation, grandparent-maintained household is identified. However, if he/she chooses instead to mark “adopted child,” the household is classified as just a two generation household of parents and adopted children—its grandparent-maintained, skip generation pattern is not identifiable. The practice of marking “adopted child” for grandchildren or other relatives could result in underestimates of skip-generation households and could also lead to overestimates of the number of “adopted children” who, according to official Census 2000 definitions, are legally adopted. Kreider (2003) documents that Alaska has the highest proportion of adopted children in the country: 3.9%. Adoption (usually informal) also was common in our African American and rural white studies. Adoptions were a

source of ambiguity in all of our ethnic groups except among Koreans (where adoption is not a cultural tradition). Interestingly, Korea was the “largest single-country source of foreign-born adopted children” in the United States, providing around 57,000 children (22%) of all foreign born adopted children in our country (Kreider 2003).

The fourth cultural and/or linguistic factor identified in this study is that relationship terms are culture-bound and may also be “language-bound.” These terms relate to specific socio-legal institutions in this country that may not be found in some immigrants’ home countries. Relationship terms also may not have exactly functionally equivalent translations from English. This may lead to issues of cross-cultural validity.

A primary example is the use of *hijo de crianza* as a translation for foster child on the Spanish version of the census form. A Latino marked *hijo de crianza* instead of writing in “niece” and “nephew” for children who were living with him. According to the ethnographers, *hijo de crianza* refers to a child one is informally raising for a friend or relative; it has no connotation of the English term, “foster child,” of taking in an unrelated child from a government agency with regular payments for that child’s care. (see also Carrasco 2003a, Carrasco and Musquiz 2003, and Carrasco 2003b). Thus, we may be getting overcounts of foster children in Latino households because of cross-cultural and linguistic differences in the meaning of foster child and *hijo de crianza*. In the Korean study, Kang (2001) said some people were confused by the concept of foster child in either English or Korean for two reasons: first, Korea has no such foster child institutional system, and second, foster child was translated as “child under trusteeship,” which was confusing.

Relationship terms used in U.S. censuses and surveys have evolved in the specific context of mainstream American culture and institutions and may not be easily translatable into foreign language versions of census and survey forms. Literal translations of key terms into Spanish, Korean, and other languages can lead to reporting errors. Special care needs to be taken in translating census and survey questions conceptually rather than literally, and in conducting cognitive pretesting of foreign language versions of forms to determine if translated terms are functionally equivalent before they are used in live censuses and surveys.

### 3. Issues with the relationship question and household type variable

The third theme running through our ethnographic studies is issues with the relationship question and household type variable used in Census 2000.

Figure 1. Census 2000 Relationship Question

How is this person related to Person 1? *Mark [X] ONE box.*

- Husband/wife
- Natural-born son/daughter
- Adopted son/daughter
- Stepson/stepdaughter
- Brother/sister
- Father/mother
- Grandchild
- Parent-in-law
- Son-in-law/daughter-in-law
- Other relative - *Print exact relationship* ↗  
□□□□□□□□□□
- Roomer, boarder
- Housemate, roommate
- Unmarried partner
- Foster child
- Other nonrelative

The household type variable is not asked of respondents; it is generated using data from the questions on relationship and sex. Household type is one of the central variables the Census Bureau has been tracking annually with Current Population Survey data for more than a half century in the "Household and Family Characteristics" report series. This has recently been expanded and renamed "America's Families and Living Arrangements" series (Fields and Casper 2001).

There are three issues discussed here with reference to the relationship question and the "household type" variable. First, the method used in most censuses and surveys is to collect relationships just to the first person who is listed on the census form. This person is known as Person one, and also as “the householder” (respondents are instructed that the person listed first on the census form should be one of the persons who owns or rents the housing unit). Collecting relationships to Person one only can mask interrelationships among other persons in the household. Because of this, in some cases, household type may vary for the same household, depending on who is listed as Person one.

This is particularly the case for some self-reported, cohabiting households, which had grown in number to about 5.5 million households by 2000 (Simmons and O’Connell 2003). For example, in the case of a mother, her child and her unmarried partner, if she is Person one, the household is classified as a female householder family household. If her partner is Person one, the same household is now classified as a male householder nonfamily household, because neither the woman nor her child is related to him by kinship, marriage or adoption. In this case, the method of asking the question leads to very inconsistent reporting of household type for the *same* household.

It is important to note here that Census 2000 data show that living in unmarried partner families seems to

be more prevalent for both adults and children in some race/ethnic groups than for others. Of all households in Census 2000, 5.2% consisted of self-reporting unmarried couples. Asians<sup>4</sup> and whites had the lowest rates of self-reported unmarried couple households to the total number of households for their groups—3.0% and 4.9%, respectively—while the other race/ethnic subpopulations had higher rates: American Indians and Alaska Natives (9.3%); Native Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders (7.5%); Hispanics (7.5%), and African Americans (6.4%). (Calculated from Census Bureau American FactFinder Table PCT22 data in Summary File 2 by race and Hispanic origin: May, 2004).

Children too, of some race and ethnic groups are more likely to live in unmarried couple households. Of all children in households in Census 2000, 5.7% were living in households where an unmarried partner of the householder was identified. Asian<sup>5</sup> and non-Hispanic white children had the lowest rates of living in self-identified unmarried couple households—4.7% and 2.3%—while children in the other race/ethnic groups had higher rates: American Indian/Alaska Native (10.9%), Latinos (8.3%), and African Americans (7.6%) (calculated from Lugaila and Overturf 2004: Table 6 data).

A second issue with collecting relationships to Person one only is that we may not be able to ascertain whether the unmarried partner of Person one is the biological parent of a coresident child. One solution to this problem would be to ask for all interrelationships within the household. Exactly this has been done for the last 20 or so years in the Household Relationship Topical Module of the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), which is administered by an interviewer. In contrast, in a self-administered, mailout mode, it would be quite cumbersome for respondents to complete a grid to collect all interrelationships in the household. Such a grid would also take up considerable space on a census or survey form. However, there is precedent for doing this in a paper and pencil (PAPI) format: this was done on the 2001 England census

form, shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Example of an Individual-level Question that Collects All Interrelationships on a Mailout Census Form (2001 England census form)

Name of Person 3

First Name	
Surname	

  

Relationship of Person 3 to Person ⇒

		1	2
Husband or wife	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Partner	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Son or daughter	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Stepchild	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Brother or Sister	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mother or father	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Stepmother or Stepfather	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Grandchild	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Grandparent	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other related	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Unrelated	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

A smaller fix for cohabiting households would be to add a new category to the relationship question for “child of unmarried partner.”

The third issue with the relationship question is that the number and types of relationships specified in stand-alone, preselected response categories set limits on the types of complex households that can be identified. In Census 2000, the addition of the categories “parent-in-law” and “son-/daughter-in-law” enabled the Census Bureau to do the first tabulations of multi-generational households in a direct lineal line, such as parent, adult child, and grandchild. (Simmons and O’Neill 2001). However, multi-generational households based on laterally related kin—such as aunt, niece, and niece’s child—could not be fully identified. According to a new report by Lugaila and Overturf (2004: 7, 8), relationships of niece, nephew and other more distant kin are more prevalent among some race and ethnic groups than others. For example, African American children account for 15% of all children, but for 29% of relatives of the householder other than biological, step, and adopted sons, daughters, and grandchildren (such as nephews, nieces, cousins, etc). Latino children account for 17% of all children, but 38% of relatives other than sons, daughters, and grandchildren. The authors of that study concluded from this and other data that Latinos

<sup>4</sup> These calculations were done for those in each race group who marked just one race. Census 2000 allowed persons to mark more than one race. It is possible to use data for those who marked one race alone, such as white alone, or for those who marked one race, such as white, alone or in combination. The choice of using data for those who marked one race alone was done to avoid double-counting some persons in more than one of the race categories.

<sup>5</sup> Using single race only data. See note 4.

may more frequently live in extended families. (For more information on coresident grandparents and grandchildren, see Simmons and Dye 2003)

While the “other relative” line in the U.S. Census 2000 relationship question shown earlier includes space for a write-in, not all respondents will go to the extra effort to write these exact relationships in, resulting in inconsistent reporting. Tabulations of such laterally-based, multigenerational households from write-in responses alone would therefore be likely to be an underestimate of their true number in the population.

The third issue with the relationship question was already identified: in some cases, the categories are not mutually exclusive: more than one answer can be right, as in the case of the Inupiaq grandparent who can logically mark either grandchild or adopted child. When more than one relationship category can be marked, the choice of one or the other may cause household type to vary and sometimes to be masked.

## CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

In summary, this paper has identified three major cross-cutting themes identified in the study of complex households in six race/ethnic groups: 1) conceptual differences in the definition and application of the key concept and unit of selection and analysis, “household”; 2) cultural, linguistic, and nationality differences with survey concepts, methods, and procedures; and 3) issues with the relationship question and household type variable.

Much of the foregoing discussion has focused on findings specific to this qualitative study of the relationship question and household types in the context of the U.S. decennial census. The three themes, however, also have wider relevance to other surveys of heterogeneous populations done by other survey agencies and companies. Here are some suggestions for survey agencies and companies in this and in other countries for research to address issues raised here.

### 1. Suggestions for Revisions to and Pretesting of the Relationship Question

- Expand the number and precision of response categories in relationship questions to reflect the growing cultural diversity of this country and its household composition, particularly among some minority populations. Add niece/nephew, aunt/uncle, cousin, brother-in-law/sister-in-law, and grandparent. This might be tried in an experimental panel of a sample survey. This suggestion to consider expanding relationship categories would be relevant in

some international surveys.

- Add and cognitively test “child of unmarried partner” as a specific nonrelative response category to obtain more accurate information on the numbers and types of unmarried households with children. Unmarried partner households are increasing in number, with American Indian, Alaska Native, Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders, Hispanics and African Americans having above-average proportions of unmarried partner households. There is also evidence from Census 2000 that American Indian, Alaska Native, Hispanic and African American children are more likely to be living in unmarried partner households than others.
- Cognitively test one or more relationship questions with the expanded categories listed in the two bullets above with respondents from several race/ethnic groups.
- Incorporate findings from these cognitive tests, if promising, into a field test using statistically valid samples.

### 2. Suggestions for New Research on the Relationship Question and Household Type

Design new research to cognitively develop and field test an individual-level question on a mailout form to identify all interrelationships in the household, not just relationship to Person one. The individual-level question used on the 2001 England census form shown in Figure 2 could serve as a starting point for discussion.

### 3. Suggestions on Language and Translation Issues

Conduct research to identify linguistic, cultural, cognitive, and methodological issues in developing foreign language versions of survey forms and develop and test improved foreign language forms. This is particularly important for cross-national surveys.

### 4. Suggestions on Outreach and Training

Develop and test special training modules for interviewers to identify cultural factors that may affect the way respondents in ethnic and/or linguistic subpopulations interpret and answer census and survey questions. Provide instructions and procedures on how to help respondents “translate” their answers into the right survey categories.

### 5. Suggestions for New Ethnographic Research Related

to Coverage and Residence Rules

Plan and conduct more ethnographic studies of household types by race/ethnic groups to identify other factors that may affect the quality of household data in censuses and/or surveys.

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