
FAMILY BOUNDARY AMBIGUITY AND THE MEASUREMENT OF FAMILY STRUCTURE: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF COHABITATION*

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We used data from the first wave of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health to examine family boundary ambiguity in adolescent and mother reports of family structure and found that the greater the family complexity, the more likely adolescent and mother reports of family structure were discrepant. This boundary ambiguity in reporting was most pronounced for cohabiting stepfamilies. Among mothers who reported living with a cohabiting partner, only one-third of their teenage children also reported residing in a cohabiting stepfamily. Conversely, for those adolescents who reported their family structure as a cohabiting stepfamily, just two-thirds of their mothers agreed. Levels of agreement between adolescents and mothers about residing in a two-biological-parent family, single-mother family, or married stepfamily were considerably higher. Estimates of the distribution of adolescents across family structures vary according to whether adolescent, mother, or combined reports are used. Moreover, the relationship between family structure and family processes differed depending on whose reports of family structure were used, and boundary ambiguity was associated with several key family processes. Family boundary ambiguity presents an important measurement challenge for family scholars.

Cohabitation is now a common experience among U.S. adults and children. A majority of persons in their 20s and 30s have cohabited, and the modal path of entry into marriage is cohabitation (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Bumpass and Sweet 1989; Bumpass, Sweet, and Cherlin 1991). Cohabitation is a family status that includes children; almost half of cohabiting unions have children present. Bumpass and Lu (2000) estimated that 40% of children will spend some time in a cohabiting family before age 16. These figures demonstrate the importance of obtaining reliable and valid measures of cohabitation in our research on family structure and living arrangements.

Recently published studies have documented various challenges (e.g., terminology and definitions) associated with measuring cohabitation (Casper and Cohen 2000; Manning and Smock 2005; Teitler, Reichman, and Koball 2006), but none have investigated family boundary ambiguity or the propensity of two family members to differ in their reports of family structure (Boss 1980, 2007; Carroll, Olson, and Buckmiller 2007). In line with research on *married* stepfamilies that shows that family members often disagree about who

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is in and who is out of their family (e.g., Furstenberg 1987; Pasley 1987; White 1998), we anticipate that ambiguity surrounding the boundaries of *cohabiting* stepfamilies is likely to be especially blurry because cohabitation remains an incomplete institution in which family roles and relationships are often unclear (Cherlin 1978; Nock 1995). In fact, prior research shows that the more complex the family form, the more likely family boundary ambiguity (for a summary, see Carroll et al. 2007). Boundary ambiguity has important consequences. First, it can lead to inconsistencies in the measurement of family membership, undermining the reliability and validity of family structure–related estimates. Second, boundary ambiguity is linked to poorer family functioning (Boss 2007; Carroll et al. 2007), and therefore inconsistencies in reports of family structure may bias estimates of its effects on family processes and interactions.

In this article, we argue that cohabitation poses significant measurement challenges because the ambiguity of family boundaries characterizing this complex family form leads to inconsistencies in reporting of cohabitation. Family structure is usually treated as an objective social fact when in reality, family structure reports are based on subjective views of the family (Boss 2007; White 1998). Using data from the first wave of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), we compare adolescent and mother reports of family structure to document both the extent to which boundary ambiguity exists and its impact on population estimates of adolescents' living arrangements. We also investigate whether using adolescent, mother, or combined reports of family structure yield different conclusions about the association between family structure and family processes. Our conclusion outlines approaches to improve the measurement of children's family structure.

MEASURING COHABITATION

Children's living arrangements have become increasingly complex and unstable (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Raley and Wildsmith 2004). A declining share of children reside with two biological married parents, and a growing share of children live in an array of other arrangements, including married stepfamilies, single-parent families, and cohabiting families (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Seltzer 2000). Until recently, research on children's living arrangements often obscured cohabitation. Only in the past decade or so have cohabiting families been distinguished from other family types (Manning 2002). About 20% of single-mother families include a cohabiting partner, and nearly one-third of single-father families also contain a cohabiting partner (London 1998; Manning and Smock 1997). Most stepfamilies have been formalized through marriage, but some are maintained informally through cohabitation (Stewart 2005). Among adolescents living in stepparent families, one-third live with cohabiting parents and two-thirds live with married parents (Manning and Lamb 2003). Taken together, these figures indicate that basic measurement of children's living arrangements requires including cohabitation as a family type.

Estimates of cohabitation are especially sensitive to different measurement strategies (Casper and Cohen 2000). Early estimates of cohabitation were derived through indirect measurement approaches. The Census Bureau measured cohabitation by determining the number of POSSLQ households, that is, partners of opposite sex sharing living quarters. POSSLQs are defined as households containing only two persons of the opposite sex who are unrelated and are at least age 15. This definition excludes cohabitators with resident children and persons living in complex households. It also mistakenly identifies persons living as roommates for cohabiting partners. Casper and Cohen (2000) introduced an adjusted POSSLQ measure that captures many of those cohabitators with children and yields more generous estimates of the cohabiting population from the 1970s to the 1990s than the original measure. A comparison of the adjusted POSSLQ measure with direct measures of cohabitation available in data sets such as the 1987–1988 National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) and 1995 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) reveals that these direct measures produce even larger estimates of the cohabiting population. Direct

questions about cohabitation (referred to as “unmarried partners” in household rosters) were first included in the 1990 decennial census and the 1995 Current Population Survey (CPS). Direct measures of cohabitation from the 1995–1997 CPS surveys actually yield lower estimates than the adjusted or unadjusted POSSLQ or other surveys (e.g., NSFH and NSFG). This disparate pattern of findings led Casper and Cohen (2000) to caution researchers to be mindful of the ways in which cohabitation is conceptualized and measured, particularly when making comparisons across surveys.

Today, most national data collections include direct measures of cohabitation, but surveys nonetheless use various strategies to ascertain cohabitation. Some surveys include questions about current and prior times the respondent has lived with someone of the opposite sex. Another approach is to ask respondents to report their relationships to other household members by completing a household roster. The most common method to identify cohabitators is to include relationship types on these rosters, such as “partner” or “unmarried partner.”

Recent research on measurement issues and cohabitation indicates that current measurement strategies may be less than ideal. From in-depth interviews with 115 cohabitators, Manning and Smock (2005) concluded that many cohabitators do not understand the term “unmarried partner” and would not use it to describe their cohabiting relationship. This finding suggests that U.S. census figures (which are derived from reports that the relationship to the household head is “unmarried partner”) may underestimate cohabitation.

Three studies relying on data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing survey also have uncovered considerable complexity in the measurement of cohabitation. First, reports of cohabitation often vary according to the number of nights the couple spends together; cohabitation is perhaps more fluid than marriage (Knab 2004). Second, mothers with newborns do not always consistently report whether they were cohabiting when the child was born, and their reports of cohabitation sometimes change during follow-up interviews (Teitler et al. 2006). Third, reports from mothers and fathers about whether they were cohabiting at the time of the child’s birth occasionally differ (Teitler and Reichman 2001). The findings from these studies challenge both the reliability and validity of current measures of cohabitation. Researchers are increasingly interested in the implications of cohabitation for child well-being, making it important to have accurate measures of cohabitation. As described in the following section, there also are important theoretical reasons to expect that the measures may not be robust.

FAMILY BOUNDARY AMBIGUITY

The measurement challenges posed by emerging family forms such as cohabitation are not new. Family boundary ambiguity, which refers to inconsistency in reporting who is in and who is out of the family, has been extensively documented in research on divorce and remarriage (e.g., Boss 1980; Carroll et al. 2007; Ganong and Coleman 1994; Pasley 1987; Stewart 2005), since it is positively associated with family complexity (Boss 2007). Consistent with the notion of boundary ambiguity, Cherlin (1978) described married stepfamilies as “incomplete institutions” because the norms and expectations for family members are not clearly defined. Stepfamilies require individual members to create kinship ties and establish among themselves the contours of their responsibilities and obligations to one another. These kinship tasks are difficult for many stepfamilies, undermining family functioning and contributing to instability (Cherlin and Furstenberg 1994).

The ambiguity surrounding stepfamily members’ roles is evidenced in Furstenberg’s (1987) study showing that many individuals do not report stepfamily members when asked to list the people in their family. For example, 15% of parents did not report stepchildren who resided in the household (versus only 1% of parents who neglected to mention biological children). And, whereas about 7% of children failed to mention a biological mother or father, 31% of children did not include a residential stepparent in their family list. Children

were also more likely to omit residential stepsiblings than biological siblings (41% compared with 19%).

Similarly, White (1998) found that children's reports of siblings are unreliable, particularly when step- and half-siblings are involved. Using data from the two waves of the NSFH, she calculated that about 16% of respondents overreported and another 15% underreported their siblings. These discrepancies are largely attributable to the classification difficulties posed by complex family forms, including stepfamilies that involve the presence of step- and half-siblings.

The incomplete institutionalization of new family forms is linked to the measurement challenges involved with complex family structures (White 1998). Without shared understandings of the norms and roles involved in these "nontraditional" families, family boundary ambiguity leads to inconsistencies in reports of who is in and who is out of the family (Boss 1980, 2007; Ganong and Coleman 1994; Pasley 1987; Stewart 2005). Therefore, it is not surprising that there are discrepancies in reports of membership in complex family structures. Stated differently, because individuals define their families, the reliability of our measures may be compromised. The more complex the family form, the greater the family boundary ambiguity (Boss 1980; Stewart 2005). White (1998:732) argued that "family structure has a larger subjective component than we have accorded it . . . incongruity is not error." Family structure reports, particularly for complex families, are likely to depend in part on who is doing the reporting. Discrepancies may occur between siblings, partners, or the parent and child. In their study of adolescents following parental divorce, Buchanan, Maccoby, and Dornbusch (1996) encountered discrepancies in terms of the presence of new partners, the remarriage status (i.e., cohabiting versus married) of a parent, and the duration of the new relationship.

Cohabiting stepfamilies are arguably even less institutionalized than married stepfamilies, which are formed through a tie that is legally binding. Although increasingly common, cohabiting stepfamilies are predicated on informal ties between two adults and their partner's children (Stewart 2007). Boundary ambiguity is sensitive to the type and complexity of stepfamily arrangements (Carroll et al. 2007). In the sole published study to date of family boundary ambiguity to include cohabitation, Stewart (2005) found that a discrepancy in stepparents' reports of their (and their partner's) children was greater among cohabiting stepfamilies than among married stepfamilies (29% versus 11%).

THE PRESENT STUDY

The National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) data provide a unique opportunity to compare family structure reports of parents and adolescents to estimate the prevalence and consequences of boundary ambiguity. Few other national data sets include family structure reports from both children and parents (exceptions are the National Education Longitudinal Study, the High School and Beyond Survey, and the Intergenerational Panel Study of Parents and Children), and none contain as recent and large a sample of children in diverse family forms as the Add Health. Nearly all prior studies using the Add Health relied on the child's perspective of family structure (e.g., Bearman and Brüückner 2001; Brown 2006; Cavanagh, Schiller, and Riegle-Crumb 2006; Demuth and Brown 2004; Harris, Duncan, and Boisjoly 2002; King, Harris, and Heard 2004; Meier 2003; Videon 2002). One exception is Manning and Lamb (2003), who categorized families as cohabiting if either the mother or the child reported it. Few studies using other data sources have considered family membership as defined by the parent and child (an exception is Sun [2003], who used NELS data). To date, no study has analyzed reports of cohabiting family structure from both the child's and the parent's perspective.

We begin by documenting patterns of boundary ambiguity, that is, whether and how mothers and adolescents (dis)agree about their family structure. We also provide estimates of the distribution of adolescents across family structures using adolescent, mother, and

combined reports to illustrate how the source of data alters the estimates. Then, all pairs in which either (or both) the adolescent or the mother reports the current family structure as a cohabiting stepfamily are examined to determine the extent to which mothers and adolescents report different family structures. In particular, this discrepancy centers on either the nature of the mother's relationship to the partner (i.e., married versus cohabiting stepfamily) or the presence of the partner (i.e., single-mother family versus cohabiting stepfamily). We also examine the factors associated with discrepant reports of family structure among this group to determine which adolescent-mother pairs are more (or less) likely to provide conflicting information about their current living arrangements. Prior work on family boundary ambiguity suggests that several demographic characteristics (e.g., older age of child, nonwhite, and less education) as well as prior marital experience may heighten the odds that the adolescent and mother do not report the same family structure (Madden-Derdich, Leonard, and Christopher 1999; Stewart 2005).

Finally, the relationship between family boundary ambiguity and family processes is evaluated. Prior research on married stepfamilies shows that boundary ambiguity is associated with less effective family functioning and reduced relationship quality (Boss 2007; Carroll et al. 2007; Ganong and Coleman 1994; Stewart 2005). Family processes—the interactive or relational qualities of the family environment—are the intervening mechanisms through which family structure influences adolescent development (Acock and Demo 1994; Brofenbrenner 1979). These processes are not only critical as predictors of well-being but also, in some work, treated as indicators of well-being (Thornton 2001). Core family processes include closeness, distance regulation (which is particularly salient during adolescence), and caring or belonging (Day, Gavazzi, and Acock 2001).

We examine whether adolescent versus mother reports of family structure are similarly related to these family processes as well as whether boundary ambiguity is associated with family processes. If the pattern of association is similar regardless of whose report is used and is not sensitive to disagreement between mothers and adolescents, then future data collection efforts presumably can obtain reasonable information on family structure from either adolescents or mothers. Alternatively, if the patterns differ according to whose report is used or if boundary ambiguity is associated with family processes, then perhaps collecting data from multiple reporters would be worthwhile. Indeed, boundary ambiguity may be part of the reason why prior work on the association between parental cohabitation and adolescent well-being has not yielded consistent findings (cf. Manning 2002). We estimate a series of models using (1) the adolescent's family structure report, (2) the mother's family structure report, and (3) a combined mother and adolescent family structure report. This approach permits an evaluation of how specific strategies for the measurement of family structure are related to family processes to determine whether the source of information (i.e., mother or adolescent) or discrepancy between sources is linked to adolescent well-being.

METHOD

Data

We use the first wave of the Add Health, collected in 1995. The Add Health includes both an in-home parent interview and an in-home adolescent interview. The respondents were students in grades 7 through 12 from a sample of 80 high schools and 52 middle schools in the United States. The analytic sample for our article is composed of adolescents who reported residing with their biological or adoptive mother ($N = 16,588$) and whose mother responded to the parent interview ($N = 14,047$).¹

1. Nonresponse on the mother interview ($N = 1,541$) was not associated with adolescent reports of family structure.

The Add Health data are appropriate for our analyses for several reasons. The primary advantage of the Add Health is that the data include questions about family structure directed to both the adolescent and the parent. Other national data sources rely on the parent's report of family structure (e.g., CPS, National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, National Survey of America's Families, NSFG, NSFH, Panel Study of Income Dynamics, and Survey of Income and Program Participation).² Additional benefits of using the Add Health include the large sample that ensures a sufficient number of mothers who are cohabiting, and questions that tap several family processes.

Family Structure

Adolescents are asked to fill out a household roster, which we use to construct a measure of the *adolescent's report of family structure*. One category on this roster is mother's cohabiting partner. For these analyses, respondents who reported living with their biological or adoptive mother and their "mother's partner" are coded as living in cohabiting stepfamilies. Adolescent's family structure differentiates among two-biological-parent, married stepparent, cohabiting stepparent, and single-mother families.

The parent interview includes several questions that are used to establish the *mother's report of family structure*. Mothers are coded as living in a cohabiting stepfamily if they reported that at the time of the survey, they were living in a "marriage-like" relationship and not living with the biological father of their child. The question about the type of relationship was prefaced with a series of questions that started with, "The next questions are about your marriages and marriage-like relationships." Mothers reported on the number of relationships and then were asked, "Think about your present or most recent such relationship. During what years were you married or living with this person?" The mother then indicated whether she was married or living with someone in each year and whether the relationship was a "marriage or marriage-like relationship." Finally the mother was asked, "Is this relationship still going on?" We categorize mother's family structure into the same four family categories as adolescent's family structure: two-biological-parent, married stepparent, cohabiting stepparent, or single-mother family.

Combined family structure is a variable designed to capture agreement between adolescents and mothers about their current living arrangements. Here, adolescent-mother pairs are classified into a family type only if they both reported the same family structure, that is, they both reported residing in a two-biological-parent, married stepparent, cohabiting stepparent, or single-mother family. For this combined measure, pairs in which reports are discrepant are captured in a residual category labeled *family boundary ambiguity*.

Family boundary ambiguity taps disagreement between the adolescent and mother reports of family structure. It is a dichotomous measure coded 1 if the two reports differ and 0 if they are the same. This approach is consistent with that of prior research on boundary ambiguity that has relied on household rosters to construct measures of family membership (Pasley 1987; Stewart 2005).

Family Processes

We consider three indicators of family processes that have been identified by prior research as central components of the family environment (Day et al. 2001) and are likely to be related to family boundary ambiguity (Carroll et al. 2007; Ganong and Coleman 1994). All of these measures are derived from adolescent reports and tap into parenting and family dynamics, the relational aspects of family life that are expected to be undermined by boundary ambiguity (Boss 2007).

2. A summary of the question wording and reporting source for cohabitation in various national surveys, including the Add Health, is available upon request from the authors.

Mother-adolescent closeness is composed of the following four items: you feel close to your mother, your mother is warm and loving toward you, you are satisfied with the way your mother and you communicate with each other, and you are satisfied with your relationship with your mother. Values for each item range from 1 to 5, with higher values indicating better relationship quality. The Cronbach's alpha for the scale is .85.

Family connectedness sums the adolescent's responses to a series of four questions about the quality of family life: How much do you feel that your parents care about you; that the people in your family understand you; that you and your family have fun together; and that your family pays attention to you? Values for each item range from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). The Cronbach's alpha for the scale is .76.

Autonomy is a count variable that tallies the number of domains in which the adolescent makes decisions. These domains include what time to be home on the weekends, who to hang out with, what to wear, how much television to watch, what programs to watch on television, what time to go to bed, and what to eat. Higher values on this variable indicate greater autonomy from maternal influence.

Other Covariates

We include control variables in a model that examines the factors related to family boundary ambiguity. There are three measures of the child's demographic characteristics: *age* (coded in years), *gender* (male is coded 1, female 0), and *race/ethnicity* (white, which is the reference category; African American; Latino; and other). Mothers reported on the family's socioeconomic status, including maternal education, marital history, and parental income. *Education* is coded into four categories: less than a high school diploma, high school diploma (the reference category), some college, and college degree. *Marital history* is a dichotomous variable indicating whether the mother has ever been married. *Family income* is logged to correct for skewness. Missing cases are imputed to the mean, and a dummy variable flags the imputation.

Analytic Strategy

First, we document the extent of family boundary ambiguity in family structure reports by tabulating the percentage of mothers whose reports agree with their adolescent's report of family structure, as well as the percentage of adolescents whose reports agree with their mother's report of family structure ($N = 14,047$). Additionally, we estimate the distribution of adolescents by family structure using adolescent, mother, and combined reports to determine whether population estimates of adolescents' family living arrangements are sensitive to the source of the data. Since boundary ambiguity most commonly arises for cohabiting stepfamilies, a closer examination of the types and correlates of discrepancies between adolescents and mothers for all pairs in which either the mother or the adolescent reported living in a cohabiting stepfamily ($N = 831$) is warranted.

Second, we estimate multivariate models to evaluate the linkages between various measures of family structure and three indicators of family processes ($N = 14,047$). Ordinary least squares regression is appropriate for these analyses because the dependent variables are continuous. Three sets of models are estimated. The first set uses adolescent reports of family structure, and the second uses mother reports. We estimate a zero-order or bivariate model that includes only the basic family structure variables (i.e., two-biological-parent, married stepparent, cohabiting stepparent, and single mother) and then introduce the measure of boundary ambiguity to evaluate the significance of the discrepancy in adolescent and mother reports of family structure. The third set of models uses the combined family structure measure and family boundary ambiguity. To ensure that the data are nationally representative of adolescents in the United States, design effects must be taken into account (Bearman, Jones, and Udry 1997). All analyses are conducted using STATA survey estimation procedures to obtain correct standard errors (Chantala and Tabor 1999).

Table 1. Boundary Ambiguity in Adolescent and Mother Reports of Family Structure (percentages)

	No Boundary Ambiguity	Boundary Ambiguity	Total
Adolescent Reports			
Two-biological-parent family	93.3	6.7	100.0
Single-mother family	81.2	18.8	100.0
Married stepparent family	87.3	12.7	100.0
Cohabiting stepparent family	66.8	33.2	100.0
Mother Reports			
Two-biological-parent family	99.4	0.6	100.0
Single-mother family	88.4	11.6	100.0
Married stepparent family	69.8	30.2	100.0
Cohabiting stepparent family	34.1	65.9	100.0

Notes: $N = 14,047$. Figures are weighted percentages.

Source: Add Health Wave 1.

RESULTS

Family Boundary Ambiguity in Adolescent and Mother Reports of Family Structure

Overall, there is a high level of congruence between mother and adolescent reports of family structure; 89% of mothers and adolescents reported living in the same family structure (result not shown). Conversely, 11% of adolescent-mother pairs exhibit family boundary ambiguity.³ Table 1 shows that family boundary ambiguity varies considerably by family structure. The first panel is based on adolescent reports of family structure and shows the weighted percentage of mothers whose family structure reports agree with those of their offspring and the percentage that have boundary ambiguity (i.e., disagree). Typically, adolescents who reported living with two biological parents also have mothers who reported this same family structure (93%). A somewhat lower percentage (81%) of adolescents who claimed to live with single mothers have mothers who also stated they are single mothers. Similarly, 87% of adolescents who reported living in a married stepfamily have mothers who also reported living in a married stepfamily. The greatest level of ambiguity occurs among adolescents who reported living in cohabiting stepfamilies. Only two-thirds of teenagers who stated that they live in a cohabiting stepfamily have mothers who also reported living in a cohabiting stepfamily. Among teens who reported living in a cohabiting stepfamily but whose mothers did not, one-fifth of their mothers reported being single mothers, and the remaining 14% claimed to be in a married stepfamily (results not shown).

The second panel of Table 1 focuses on mothers' reports of family structure and shows the weighted percentage of adolescents whose reports of family structure (dis)agree with those of their mothers. There is nearly perfect congruence (99%) between mother and adolescent reports of living with two biological parents. Similarly, among mothers who reported being single mothers, 88% of adolescents' reports agree. In contrast, only 70% of mothers who stated they live in married stepfamilies have an adolescent who also reported

3. This figure is identical to that obtained by Sun (2003), who compared mismatches in parent and student reports of family structure (but did not explicitly examine cohabitation) using NELS data. Sun found mismatches for 11% of cases and deleted these cases from subsequent analyses.

living in a married stepfamily. In fact, about one-fifth of mothers who reported living in a married stepfamily have a teen who reported living with two biological parents (results not shown). The family category with the highest level of ambiguity is cohabiting stepfamily. Only one-third of mothers who reported living in this family type have an adolescent who also claimed to be living in a cohabiting stepfamily. Most often the discrepancy occurs because teens reported that they live with single mothers (45%) and one-fifth state they live in a married stepfamily (results not shown). This pattern of findings is consistent with prior research on family boundary ambiguity: the more complex the family form, the greater the discrepancy in reporting.

Table 2 demonstrates that family boundary ambiguity is consequential for population-level estimates (i.e., weighted percentages) of the family structure distribution of adolescents. Specifically, estimates of the distribution of family structure vary according to whether we rely on the adolescent, mother, or combined report of family living arrangements. Consistent with the results shown in Table 1, the largest difference emerges for estimates of the percentage of adolescents residing in cohabiting stepfamilies. Using adolescent reports of family structure, we estimate that slightly less than 3% of adolescents reside in a cohabiting stepfamily. In contrast, relying on mother reports of family structure yields a considerably higher estimate, at over 5%. Thus, the number of adolescents living in a cohabiting stepfamily is 67% higher when we rely on mother rather than adolescent reports. This difference persists across racial/ethnic groups and is most pronounced among blacks, for whom the estimated percentage residing in a cohabiting stepfamily ranges from 3% using adolescent reports to 10% using mother reports. Such wide variability in estimates calls into question prior research on the prevalence of cohabitation as a living arrangement for children and reinforces our assertion (as well as that of others who have conducted research on the measurement of cohabitation) that current strategies for measuring cohabitation may not be robust. In addition, our understanding of stepfamilies depends on the reporter. Only 18% of stepfamilies are cohabiting when we rely on adolescents' reports, but 25% are when we draw on mothers' reports (results not shown).

Using the combined report measure (i.e., family structure coding based on agreement between adolescents and mothers about their current living arrangements) reveals that if we require mother and child agreement, just 2% of adolescents live in a cohabiting stepfamily.⁴ The combined measure also indicates that a nontrivial share of adolescents and mothers do not agree about their family structure (11%). Substantial boundary ambiguity exists among black, white, and Hispanic children and mothers. Nearly 1 in 10 white teens and mothers and 1 in 8 black and Hispanic adolescents and mothers provided discrepant reports of family structure.

Table 3 focuses on the types of boundary ambiguity that occur among those adolescent-mother pairs in which the adolescent, the mother, or both reported living in a cohabiting stepfamily ($N = 831$). There is a very high level of discord in reports about cohabiting stepfamilies; only 30% of these mother-adolescent pairs concurred that they reside in a cohabiting stepfamily. The most common type of boundary ambiguity (39%) is when a mother reported living in a cohabiting stepfamily and the adolescent reported residing in a single-mother family. In this situation, the teenager does not appear to have recognized the mother's cohabiting partner. Another type of ambiguity exists for 16% of mothers and adolescents in which the mother reported living with a cohabiting partner and the adolescent

4. This combined measure of family structure can be viewed as establishing a lower boundary for the population estimate. We defined an upper boundary by counting all adolescent-mother pairs in which at least one member reported residing in the family type in question. Of course, this strategy does not provide a mutually exclusive and exhaustive measure of family structure, but it is useful for establishing an upper limit. For cohabiting stepfamilies, the upper boundary estimate was 6%. Upper boundary estimates for two-biological-parent, single-mother, and married stepfamilies were 62%, 25%, and 17%, respectively. These and race/ethnicity-specific upper bounds estimates are available upon request from the authors.

Table 2. Family Structure Distribution (percentages), by Type of Report (adolescent, mother, or combined report of family structure), for the Total Sample and Separately by Race/Ethnicity

Family Structure	Total			Black			White			Hispanic		
	Adolescent	Mother	Combined	Adolescent	Mother	Combined	Adolescent	Mother	Combined	Adolescent	Mother	Combined
Two-Biological-Parent Family	62.0	58.2	57.9	34.7	32.0	31.3	67.8	63.9	63.8	58.8	54.2	53.2
Married Stepparent Family	12.4	15.6	10.9	11.4	13.0	8.3	12.8	15.9	11.8	12.6	17.4	9.9
Cohabiting Stepparent Family	2.7	5.2	1.8	3.2	10.0	2.0	2.4	4.2	1.7	3.7	6.3	2.0
Single-Mother Family	22.8	21.0	18.5	50.8	45.0	41.1	17.0	15.9	14.0	24.9	22.1	18.6
Boundary Ambiguity	— ^a	— ^a	10.9	— ^a	— ^a	17.2	— ^a	— ^a	8.7	— ^a	— ^a	16.3

Notes: N = 14,047. Figures shown are weighted percentages.

Source: Add Health Wave 1.

^aNot applicable.

Table 3. Mother or Adolescent Reports of Cohabiting Stepfamily

	%
Adolescent and Mother Agree	30.1
Adolescent Cohabit and Mother Married	6.0
Adolescent Cohabit and Mother Single	8.5
Adolescent Married and Mother Cohabit	16.4
Adolescent Single and Mother Cohabit	39.0
	100.0

Notes: $N = 831$. Figures are weighted percentages.

Source: Add Health Wave 1.

stated that s/he is living with a married mother and stepfather. This may occur because the teen was embarrassed to report that the mother is cohabiting and not married or because the mother has told the child that she is married when she is not. It is less common for the adolescent to have claimed that s/he is residing in a cohabiting stepfamily when the mother reported living alone or being married (9% and 6%, respectively).

Additional analyses examine the correlates of family boundary ambiguity among the 831 mother-adolescent pairs in which either (or both) reported residing in a cohabiting stepfamily. Table 4 shows the results for a logistic regression predicting the likelihood of boundary ambiguity, that is, that only the mother or only the adolescent reported living in a cohabiting stepfamily versus both reported the family structure as cohabiting stepfamily (the reference category). Black adolescent-mother pairs are more likely than whites to disagree about whether they reside in a cohabiting family. Neither maternal education nor

Table 4. Logistic Regression Estimates of Boundary Ambiguity Between Adolescent and Mother Reports of Cohabiting Stepfamilies (unstandardized coefficients shown)

	Coefficient
Age	0.01
Male	-0.10
Race/Ethnicity (ref. = white)	
Black	0.75*
Hispanic	0.47
Other	0.70
Mother's Education (ref. = high school diploma)	
< High school diploma	0.15
Some college	0.25
College	0.04
Mother Ever Married	-0.65**
Log Income	-0.13
Missing Income	0.17

Notes: $N = 831$. Models are corrected for the complex sampling design of the Add Health.

Source: Add Health Wave 1.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

family income is associated with boundary ambiguity. Pairs in which the mother had been previously (versus never) married are less likely to exhibit boundary ambiguity.⁵

Family Boundary Ambiguity in Family Structure Reports and Family Processes

Our final task is to examine whether and how family boundary ambiguity is related to family processes. We present results for mother-child closeness, family connectedness, and autonomy separately. For each of these family processes, we estimate three sets of models using adolescent, mother, and combined reports of family structure for the entire sample ($N = 14,047$).

Closeness. In the top panel of Table 5, Model 1a shows the association between family structure and closeness using adolescent reports of family structure. Adolescents residing in cohabiting or single-mother families reported lower levels of closeness, on average, than those in two-biological-parent families. Adolescents in married stepfamilies do not significantly differ from those in two-biological-parent families in terms of closeness. Adolescents in cohabiting stepfamilies reported significantly less closeness than those in either married stepparent or single-mother families. Introducing the dummy variable for boundary ambiguity does not appreciably change the pattern of association between family structure and closeness, as shown in Model 1b. Nor is boundary ambiguity related to closeness.

The middle panel reveals that using mother reports of family structure yields a distinct pattern of findings: not only did adolescents in cohabiting and single-mother families report less closeness to their mothers, but so too did those in married stepfamilies (Model 2a). Granted, the magnitude of the coefficients changes relatively little. Adding the boundary ambiguity measure does not alter the pattern of association found in the initial model, nor is it related to closeness (Model 2b).

The bottom panel uses the combined measure of family structure. Here, only adolescents in cohabiting stepfamilies (as well as those whose reports disagree with their mothers about their family structure) reported less closeness than adolescents in two-biological-parent families (Model 3a). Adolescents in married stepfamilies or single-mother families do not differ from those in two-biological-parent families, but they did report significantly more closeness than those living in cohabiting stepfamilies. These three approaches to measuring family structure would lead researchers to draw distinct conclusions about the association between family structure and mother-adolescent closeness. Although the magnitude of the coefficients remains similar across models, nonetheless the statistical significance varies considerably. Researchers typically formulate conclusions on the basis of statistical significance, suggesting different conclusions about the relationship between family structure and closeness depending on whose report of family structure is used.

Family connectedness. As shown in Model 1c, using the adolescents' reports of family structure, we find that teens residing outside of two-biological-parent families reported lower levels of family connectedness, on average. Adolescents in cohabiting stepfamilies rated their family connectedness as significantly more weak than did those in either married stepfamilies or single-mother families. The introduction of boundary ambiguity in Model 1d does not change this pattern of findings, nor is the coefficient significant.

The middle panel shows that when we use mothers' reports of family structure (Model 2c), teens outside of two-biological-parent families reported less family connectedness, on average, but unlike the results obtained using adolescent reports, here there is no additional

5. This model was also estimated for the entire sample ($N = 14,047$) to examine the correlates of boundary ambiguity (results not shown but available upon request from the authors). Blacks and Hispanics are more likely to exhibit boundary ambiguity than whites. Maternal education and family income are negatively associated with boundary ambiguity. Adolescent-mother pairs in which the mother was ever married are less likely to experience boundary ambiguity than pairs in which the mother was never married.

Table 5. OLS Regression Models Predicting Family Processes Using Adolescent, Mother, and Combined Reports of Family Structure^a (unstandardized coefficients shown)

	Closeness		Family Connectedness		Autonomy	
	Model 1a	Model 1b	Model 1c	Model 1d	Model 1e	Model 1f
Adolescent Report						
Cohabiting Stepparent Family	-0.72**	-0.68**	-1.12***	-1.09***	-0.11	-0.15
Married Stepparent Family	-0.19	-0.18	-0.62***	-0.61***	0.03	0.02
Single-Mother Family	-0.22**	-0.21*	-0.42***	-0.41***	-0.09	-0.11*
Boundary Ambiguity		-0.16		-0.09		0.16**
Mother Report						
Cohabiting Stepparent Family	-0.61***	-0.61**	-0.60***	-0.72***	-0.04	-0.16
Married Stepparent Family	-0.20*	-0.20*	-0.63***	-0.68***	0.00	-0.05
Single-Mother Family	-0.21*	-0.21*	-0.43***	-0.46***	-0.05	0.07
Boundary Ambiguity		-0.01		0.19		0.19**
Combined Report						
Cohabiting Stepparent Family	Model 3a		Model 3c		Model 3e	
Cohabiting Stepparent Family	-0.90***		-1.24***		-0.23*	
Married Stepparent Family	-0.19		-0.72***		0.01	
Single-Mother Family	-0.19		-0.41***		-0.11*	
Boundary Ambiguity	-0.33***		-0.44***		0.10	

Notes: $N = 14,047$. Models are corrected for the complex sampling design of the Add Health. Coefficients in gray boxes are significantly different from cohabiting stepfamily.

Source: Add Health Wave 1.

^aThe reference category is two-biological-parent family.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

disadvantage for those in cohabiting stepfamilies. In fact, the magnitude of the coefficient for cohabiting stepfamilies is considerably smaller using mothers' (Models 2c and 2d) than adolescents' (Models 1c and 1d) reports of family structure. Once again, the inclusion of family boundary ambiguity (Model 2d) does not alter the pattern of results, and the coefficient is not statistically significant.

The bottom panel uses combined reports of family structure (Model 3b). Cohabiting stepfamilies are associated with the lowest average levels of family connectedness, followed by married stepfamilies, families with ambiguous boundaries, single-mother families, and finally two-biological-parent families, which enjoy the highest levels. Unlike the prior two models, boundary ambiguity is significantly negatively associated with family connectedness.

Autonomy. Using adolescents' reports of family structure, there is no significant association between family type and autonomy (Model 1e). Controlling for family boundary ambiguity (Model 1f), adolescents in single-mother families have less autonomy than those in two-biological-parent families, on average. Boundary ambiguity is related to higher levels of autonomy.

The middle panel reveals a slightly different pattern for mothers' reports of family structure. Although the conclusions about family structure and autonomy are substantively similar for Models 1e and 2e, they differ for Models 1f and 2f. In Model 1f, single-mother families are negatively associated with autonomy, whereas in Model 2f, the coefficient for single-mother families is positive and nonsignificant, that is, single-mother families do not

differ from two-biological-parent families. Here again, boundary ambiguity is positively associated with autonomy.

Using the combined reports of family structure leads to a different set of conclusions. As shown in Model 3e, adolescents in single-mother families and cohabiting stepfamilies reported less autonomy than those in two-biological-parent families. Cohabiting stepfamilies are also distinct from the pairs characterized by boundary ambiguity, who tended to report more autonomy, on average.

DISCUSSION

We used data from the Wave 1 adolescent and parent in-home questionnaires of the Add Health to examine family boundary ambiguity, that is, the extent to which adolescents and mothers provide discrepant reports of family structure. Consistent with prior research showing that the greater the family complexity, the more likely is inconsistency in reporting who is in and out of the family, we anticipated that the greatest discrepancy in reporting would occur among those living in cohabiting stepfamilies. Indeed, whereas two-thirds of adolescents agreed with their mothers' reports of living in a married stepfamily, just one-third of adolescents whose mothers said they live in a cohabiting stepfamily reported the same family type. Nearly 90% of adolescents concurred with mothers who reported being single, and over 99% agreed with mothers who reported being part of a two-biological-parent family.

Certainly, this considerable ambiguity in the reporting of cohabiting stepfamilies between adolescents and their mothers has important implications for how family structure is measured. As the prevalence of cohabitation continues to increase and more children are exposed to this family type, the questionable validity of relying on a single reporter of family structure becomes more consequential. A school-based survey, the Add Health has a higher response rate for adolescents than parents. Yet, it seems that adolescents and their mothers often provide discrepant reports of their living arrangements. Using adolescent reports of family structure yields only half as many cohabiting families as tallied from mother reports in the Add Health. This discrepancy affects estimates of children in cohabiting families. From a demographic perspective, misclassification of children's living arrangements provides an inaccurate picture of the distribution of children across various family structures.

In addition to the demographic consequences of boundary ambiguity in cohabiting stepfamilies, our work reveals the importance of boundary ambiguity for research on the association between family structure and processes. Our examination of three central domains of family processes shows that whose report of family structure is used matters. The adolescent, mother, and combined reports of family structure each yielded different substantive conclusions about the linkages between family structure and family processes. Although the magnitude of the coefficients often appeared similar across the three measures of family structure (at least for maternal closeness), tests of statistical significance differed considerably.

A key finding is that the boundary ambiguity coefficient was often statistically significant, meaning that discrepancies in the reporting of family structure are related to family functioning. Although it is possible that family dynamics have a feedback effect on boundary ambiguity, boundary ambiguity scholars theorize that uncertainty about family membership sets the stage for poorer family functioning by generating conflict and stress that weakens family ties (Boss 1980, 2007; Carroll et al. 2007; Stewart 2005). Carroll et al. (2007:210–11) maintained that “unclear boundaries can create dysfunction in family processes and interactions.” And Boss (2007:107) argued that “family and relational processes [are] stymied by ambiguity.”

The findings from this study are instructive for researchers who measure family structure, especially using the Add Health data. Estimates of family structure depend on whose

report is used. Similarly, the substantive conclusions that are drawn about the associations between family structure and family processes frequently vary according to which measure of family structure is considered. Having family structure reports from two sources permits explicit measurement of family boundary ambiguity, which provides an additional layer of information that is often associated with the adolescent's experience of family interactions and relationships.

To the extent possible, researchers should fully exploit multiple-source reporting to incorporate family boundary ambiguity into measures of family structure. Researchers using data with reports from multiple sources need to document whose report(s) they rely on to measure family structure. We encourage researchers examining family structure with the Add Health data to estimate their models using adolescent, mother, and combined reports of family structure, as well as boundary ambiguity, and to report any differences they find. This strategy reflects the growing consensus that there is a subjective component to family structure and that the ambiguous boundaries of family membership are consequential for family functioning and well-being. Additional research is needed to more fully understand the causes and consequences of the social construction of family membership. We hope that in the future, researchers using data sets that permit measurement of family structure from both the child and mother perspectives will attempt to replicate and extend our analyses.

An important limitation is that we are not able to gauge the extent to which the high level of discrepancy in adolescent and mother reports of a cohabiting stepfamily is due to measurement error. The Add Health ascertains adolescent reports of family structure through a household roster, whereas mother reports are obtained through a detailed series of questions about living with someone in a marriage or marriage-like relationship. We might have achieved greater consistency in reporting if adolescents and mothers had been asked the same series of questions about their current living arrangements. Still, the pattern obtained is consistent with expectations based on prior work on family boundary ambiguity (Boss 2007; Carroll et al. 2007): the more complex the family form, the greater the discrepancy in adolescent and mother reports. Particularly, because cohabitation is an incomplete institution that is predicated on informal ties, greater attention should be paid to how we measure cohabitation in national surveys (Casper and Cohen 2000; Manning and Smock 2005). Inconsistencies in question wording may account for some of the reporting discrepancies documented in this article.⁶

Our study demonstrates that family boundary ambiguity is not uncommon, especially in complex family forms—namely, cohabiting stepfamilies. As family complexity intensifies, the validity of measures of family structure may be undermined. We provide evidence that adolescents and mothers are more likely to disagree than to agree about living in a cohabiting stepfamily and that this disagreement is theoretically and empirically linked to poorer family functioning. Whose report of family structure we use in our analyses of outcomes for adolescents affects conclusions about how adolescents fare in various family forms. White (1998:732) suggested that researchers refer to “perceived family structure,” since respondents actively construct their families. Our results resonate with White's argument. Future data collection efforts should obtain family structure information from multiple sources, including parents and children, to permit additional research on family boundary ambiguity because discrepancies yield meaningful insights not only about the social construction of family membership but also the influence of boundary ambiguity on family processes and interactions.

6. It also may be fruitful to consider whether different results would be obtained using father (versus mother) reports of family structure, although a limitation of this approach is that fewer adolescents reside with fathers. Men and women in stepfamilies differ in their reports of stepchildren and biological children (Stewart 2005), suggesting that parent gender may be an important factor.

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