

National Symposium on Family Issues

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Editors

Emerging Methods in Family Research

 Springer

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Preface

Across a range of disciplines, including psychology, sociology, education, political science and medicine, research and theory target families as central to the well-being of their members and to the well-being of the communities and larger societies in which families are embedded. The significance of families for the health of individuals and communities demands scholars' best efforts to illuminate how family roles, relationships and dynamics operate and how they influence family members.

This volume is predicated on the idea that advances in research on families will rely on innovations in design, measurement, data collection and data analysis that allow researchers to capture the multi-level complexities of family systems. Methods for studying families are often drawn from research focused on individuals. A theme throughout this volume is whether and to what extent the same kinds of methods can be applied across levels of analysis—from the individual, to the dyad, to larger family groups. In chapters throughout this volume, authors consider whether and how methods from research focused on individuals can be applied, can be modified, and are challenged when family relationships and family influences are the focus of study.

The contributions to *Emerging Methods in Family Research* are based on papers presented at the 20th Annual Penn State Symposium on Family Issues held in October, 2012. This edited volume is the culmination of two days of stimulating presentations and discussions organized around four topics: (1) strategies for quantitative analysis of variation and change in families, (2) approaches to analyzing families as systems, (3) measuring “the family” and family dynamics, and (4) new directions in the implementation and evaluation of family-focused social policies and preventive interventions.

Overview of this Volume

This volume is organized by these four topical areas. In contrast to other volumes in the decades-long Family Symposium series, our focus on methods meant that many of these chapters were written by researchers who do not self-identify as family

scholars, but rather, are known for their methodological expertise. These methodologists accepted the editors' invitation to apply their work and ideas to the study of families. The four sections of this volume each include two or three chapters that address the topical area in distinct ways, often from different disciplinary perspectives. The last chapter in each section is an integrative discussion by a family scholar who was charged with distilling the range of ideas, information, and techniques described in the session's papers toward providing insights on how novel methods could be used to advance the work of family scholars. The volume concludes with an integrative chapter by two young scholars.

Chapters in Part I focus on best methods for capturing variation and change in family processes and influences on individual family members. Family structure and processes are dynamic, responsive both to changes in individual family member's development, as well as to pressures emanating from outside the family, which are also continually in flux. Chapters by Jay Teachman, Professor of Sociology at Western Washington University, by Nilam Ram, Associate Professor of Human Development at Penn State, and colleagues, and by Si-Miin Chow, Associate Professor of Human Development at Penn State, and colleagues, focus on different timescales for studying variation and change, timescales that reflect different kinds of research questions and require different kinds of analytic methods. In the final chapter in this section, Andrew Fuligni, Professor of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at UCLA, outlines some of the contributions to our understanding of family processes and family influences that can come from sophisticated analyses of variation and change, and he considers how the benefits of collecting "repeated data" balance against the costs. For researchers interested in why one might use the models introduced in the three opening chapters, Fuligni's application of each model to the case of family sleep patterns conveys the distinctive insights that can emerge from each approach.

Family scholars have long embraced the metaphor of families as systems, yet empirical research targeting systems dynamics remains very rare. In Part II, chapters by Robin Gauthier and James Moody, both sociologists at Duke University, and by Mark Cummings and co-authors Kathleen Bergman and Kelly Kuznicki, psychologists at Notre Dame University, focus on methods for characterizing family systems and capturing their dynamics. In his integrative discussion, Robert Emery, Professor of Community Psychology at the University of Virginia, reinforces and elaborates on the important conceptual and theoretical work that must be accomplished if family researchers are to make full use of a systems approach, and he offers new ideas toward this end.

At a general level, measurement is "concerned with what can be observed, the conditions under which observations are made, and how observations are recorded for future analysis and consideration" (Amato, Chap. 11, p. 179). In Part III, chapters by Carolyn Tucker Halpern from the Department of Maternal & Child Health along with Kathleen Mullan Harris from the Department of Sociology and epidemiologist Eric Whitsel, all at University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, by Joshua Smyth, Professor of Biobehavioral Health and co-author Kristin Herron from Penn State University, and by Thomas Weisner, Professor of Psychiatry and Anthropology at UCLA, describe distinct approaches to measuring family dynamics and their

correlates. As with other dimensions of methods considered in this volume, most family research relies on measurement approaches that were developed to study individuals, and these chapters include consideration of approaches for and challenges to moving from the individual to the dyad and group levels of analysis in measuring family processes and influences. In the concluding chapter, Paul Amato, Professor of Sociology at Penn State, considers some of the strengths of these approaches to measurement and provides examples of how each might be applied to address novel questions about family processes and influences. Amato also reminds us of the challenges of defining “the family” in determining strategies for its measurement.

Recent national efforts have been directed at promoting the translation of science to application and practice as well as improving the quality of programs and policy through a focus on evaluation. Although a stronger emphasis on applying research in evidence-based programs and policies is welcome, the development, implementation and evaluation of programs and policies for families face unique challenges. The chapters in Part IV by Carol Metzler, from the Oregon Research Institute and colleagues, by Quinn Moore and Robert Wood from Mathematica Policy Research, and by Linda Collins, Professor of Human Development at Penn State, highlight new approaches to optimal design, implementation and evaluation of the effects of family programs and policies and consider some of the challenges that need to be overcome toward these ends. In the final, integrative chapter of this section, Greg Duncan, from the School of Education at the University of California Irvine, identifies a number of “best practices” in family-focused evaluation and policy research.

As is the tradition in the Family Symposium series, the final chapter of the volume was written by two scholars in the early stages of their careers as family researchers, Melissa Lippold, from Human Development and Family Studies, and Catherine McNamee, from the Population Research Institute at Penn State. Their charge was to bring to bear their distinct disciplinary backgrounds—in human development and demography, respectively—on the ideas and insights conveyed during the four sessions of the conference. Lippold and McNamee identify five themes that cut across chapters in this volume: approaches to defining “family” and capturing its complexities, assessing change and variation in families, the challenges inherent in studying families, the importance of keeping in sight the “big picture,” and the significance and special considerations involved in family research that is aimed at improving public health. Lippold and McNamee conclude with their thoughts about opportunities and challenges facing the next generation of family scholars.

Acknowledgments

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A lively, interdisciplinary team of scholars from across the Penn State community meets with us annually to generate symposia topics and plans and is available throughout the year for brainstorming and problem solving. We appreciate their enthusiasm, intellectual support, and creative ideas. In the course of selecting speakers, symposium organizers consult with a wide range of people at other universities, at NICHD, and at other organizations in order to identify highly qualified scholars to participate in the symposium. We also sincerely thank Diane Felmlee, Jennifer Graham, and Wayne Osgood for presiding over symposium sessions.

The efforts of many individuals went into planning the 2012 symposium and producing this volume. We are especially grateful for the assistance of the administrative staff in the Population Research Institute and Social Science Research Institute at Penn State, including Sherry Yocum, Donna Panasiti, Angela Jordan, and Miranda Bair. Finally, neither Symposium nor this volume would have been possible without Carolyn Scott, whose organizational skills, commitment, and attention to the many details that go into developing an engaging conference and an edited book series make it possible for us to focus on the ideas.

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