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# Implications of Changing Family Forms for Children

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## Keywords

adoptive parents, interracial/multiracial families, LGBT families,  
nontraditional families, older parents

## Abstract

This paper explores what it means to do a sociology of families, that is, one that acknowledges and considers a wider array of family forms than typically has been explored. We begin by reviewing the existing sociological research on a range of alternative family forms, ultimately focusing on older-parent, adoptive, same-sex, and multiracial families. We describe and critically assess four theoretical approaches to examining family forms—family structure, evolutionary, characteristics, and context—and their implications for children, and we discuss the utility of an approach that views family characteristics in social context. We also recommend that instead of using alternative family forms primarily or solely as counterfactuals to the so-called traditional family, researchers should compare alternative family forms to each other, noting theoretical implications for commonalities and differences found among these groups. We call for additional research on alternative families, noting its importance for sociology, family studies, and public policy.

## INTRODUCTION

All too frequently, social scientific and legal scholarship on families presumes or privileges a normative type of family—often corresponding to what has been referred to as the standard North American family (SNAF) (Smith 1993). The prototypical SNAF is composed of a husband and wife, typically in their twenties or thirties, living with their biological children in a nuclear household. In this model, heterosexual relationships, legal marriage, traditional gender roles, blood ties to offspring, and—at least implicitly—monoracial relationships are privileged.

This vision of family is increasingly becoming outdated. The demographic profile of American families has changed dramatically over the last 30 years in ways that make the SNAF a factually inaccurate representation. In fact, between 1970 and 2012, the percentage of households including married heterosexual couples with children was cut in half, from 40% to 20% (Vespa et al. 2013). The rise of single- and stepparent families, cohabiting families, families with older parents, same-sex families with children, multiracial families, and adoptive families reflects the varied arrangements in which youth are now raised. Alongside these changes, a body of scholarship has developed that attends to what we refer to as alternative family structures (also called atypical, non-traditional, postmodern, or transgressive), that is, families that do not meet one or more criteria for the SNAF (Powell et al. 2010; Rosenfeld 2007, 2010; Stacey 1996).

The rapid growth of alternative families has been met with some concern, as indicated by phrases such as family decline, family dissolution, family breakdown, and intact versus broken family that pepper the literature. Many scholars, however, explicitly favor a broader, more inclusive conceptualization of family (Biblarz & Stacey 2010, Coleman & Ganong 2004, Coontz 1992, Demo et al. 2000). This preference is apparent in the title change of the flagship journal for the National Council on Family Relations from *Journal of Marriage and the Family* (emphasis added) to *Journal of Marriage and Family*. That being said, even this title, like that of the American Sociological Association Section on Family,<sup>1</sup> continues to refer to family in the singular instead of referring to families, a term preferred by the Council on Contemporary Families. It also tellingly pairs marriage with family, perpetuating the notion that marriage is a requirement for family.

Much scholarship on alternative families compares SNAF parents to other heterosexual parents with varied marital statuses (e.g., single/divorced, remarried, or never married). As we illustrate below, single-parent, stepparent, and cohabiting families are now relatively well researched. Consequently, we do not discuss the literature on these families in detail. Instead, we treat them as points of comparison, as research suggests children in single- and stepparent households fare differently than their counterparts in alternative family forms.

Our review is focused on two-parent family arrangements that diverge from the SNAF in at least one of two ways: (a) the nature of parents' relationships to their children or (b) the demographic composition of the parenting couple. Specifically, we discuss the relatively limited research on older parents, adoptive parents, same-sex parents, and parents in interracial relationships, most of which is focused on children's well-being. It is important to note that scholars have not entirely ignored these family forms: In fact, in recent years, this journal published pieces about adoptive families and same-sex families (Fisher 2003, Moore & Stambolis-Ruhstorfer 2013). What is missing, however, is a discussion of the commonalities (and differences) among a broad array of alternative families, along with a consideration of the implications for family theory.

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<sup>1</sup>Perhaps reflecting the difficulties in changing terminology, there continues to be some inconsistency in the name of this section—with it being identified as both the Section on Family and the Section on the Sociology of the Family on the association's website.

Alternative families are not only varied across types but also internally heterogeneous. Gay and lesbian families, for example, can also be single- or stepparent families. Same-sex parents may (increasingly) be married, cohabiting, or living apart. These families may be composed of two mothers or two fathers. They can be monoracial or interracial and adoptive, biological, or a mixture of both. Scholars often reduce families, particularly those that are alternative in some way, to one dimension when, in fact, many characteristics of family members and connections between these characteristics may be relevant to outcomes of interest.

We acknowledge this diversity but also see value in recognizing the socially salient labels with which most alternative families have little choice but to contend. One of our goals is to explore what it means to do a sociology of families (in the plural) that takes as its starting point the least accepted, rather than the most normative, family arrangements. A good deal of evidence suggests that at least one important commonality linking a variety of alternative family arrangements is the fact that the children living in them often fare well. As we discuss below, parental investments in older-parent, adoptive, same-sex, and multiracial households are at least as high as, if not higher than, investments in so-called traditional families. These findings run counter to the assumption that the SNAF offers the ideal, or optimal, family context.

Research on the well-being of children in alternative living arrangements has implications for the theoretical frameworks that scholars often use to study families in general, many of which take as their starting point the SNAF. Synthesizing and evaluating this evidence also are important for public policy, as claims about the functionality of alternative family forms are not just the province of academic debates. These claims may be used to support or challenge policies about access to family rights—such as the ability to marry or adopt—that selectively offer benefits to some groups but not others. Alternative living arrangements also are at the center of public debates about who counts as family. In recent years, we have seen rapid changes—changes that are reflected in the increased media visibility of gay families, interracial families, and other alternative family forms (e.g., a Coke commercial in the 2014 Super Bowl that pictured a gay family and a Tylenol ad that featured a broad array of families). Despite some backlash to these images and, more broadly, to alternative families, there is strong evidence that Americans have increasingly shifted to a more open definition of family (Powell et al. 2010, 2015), and there is reason to be optimistic that Americans' movement to greater inclusiveness will continue.

## RESEARCH AND DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS

To understand the current state of sociological research on alternative family forms with children, we reviewed the content published in four sociology journals between January 1980 and December 2014. These include three top generalist journals, *Annual Review of Sociology*, *American Sociological Review*, and *American Journal of Sociology*, and a top specialty journal dedicated to the study of families, *Journal of Marriage and Family*. For each journal, we examined every issue published in our designated time frame manually and followed up with a JSTOR keyword search<sup>2,3</sup> looking for any articles that seriously consider<sup>4</sup> alternative family forms with

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<sup>2</sup>Keywords included adopt, adoption, adoptive, cohabit, cohabitation, cohabiting, divorce, marital dissolution, marital disruption, family structure, interracial, interethnic, intermarriage, biracial, multiracial, heterogamy, same-sex, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, LGBT, GLBT, queer, older parent, grandparent, single parent, single mother, single father, stepparent, stepfamily/families, stepmother, stepfather, remarried, blended family.

<sup>3</sup>Keywords needed to appear in at least either the abstract or title of the article.

<sup>4</sup>We borrow the idea “seriously consider” from Hunt et al. (2013). An article seriously considers a topic (e.g., alternative families) if the analysis theorizes and interprets the topic of interest rather than just including it as a control variable.

**Table 1** Operationalization of alternative family forms with children<sup>a</sup>

Family form	Operationalization
Adoptive	Families with one or more adopted child(ren)
Cohabiting	Families with children in which two individuals share a romantic interest and live together but are not married
Divorce	Families in which parents were previously married but have since legally divorced
Multiracial	Families with children in which partners are of different races or ethnicities
LGBT	Families with children in which partners are of the same sex or in which one partner is transgender
Older	Families in which children are being raised by grandparents or parents who are older than most parents with children of similar ages to their own
Single	Families with one or more child(ren) and one parent. This configuration may occur for a number of reasons, including choice, divorce, death, etc.
Stepparent	Families with stepparents (i.e., when a parent has children from a previous relationship who are not genetically related to or legally children of the other parent; either one or both parents may have children from a previous relationship)

<sup>a</sup>This list is not intended to be inclusive of all alternative family forms, just those examined in this review.

children (Hunt et al. 2013).<sup>5</sup> We included a variety of family forms: adoptive, cohabiting, divorced, multiracial, LGBT, older, single, and stepparent (for operationalization of terms, see **Table 1**).<sup>6</sup>

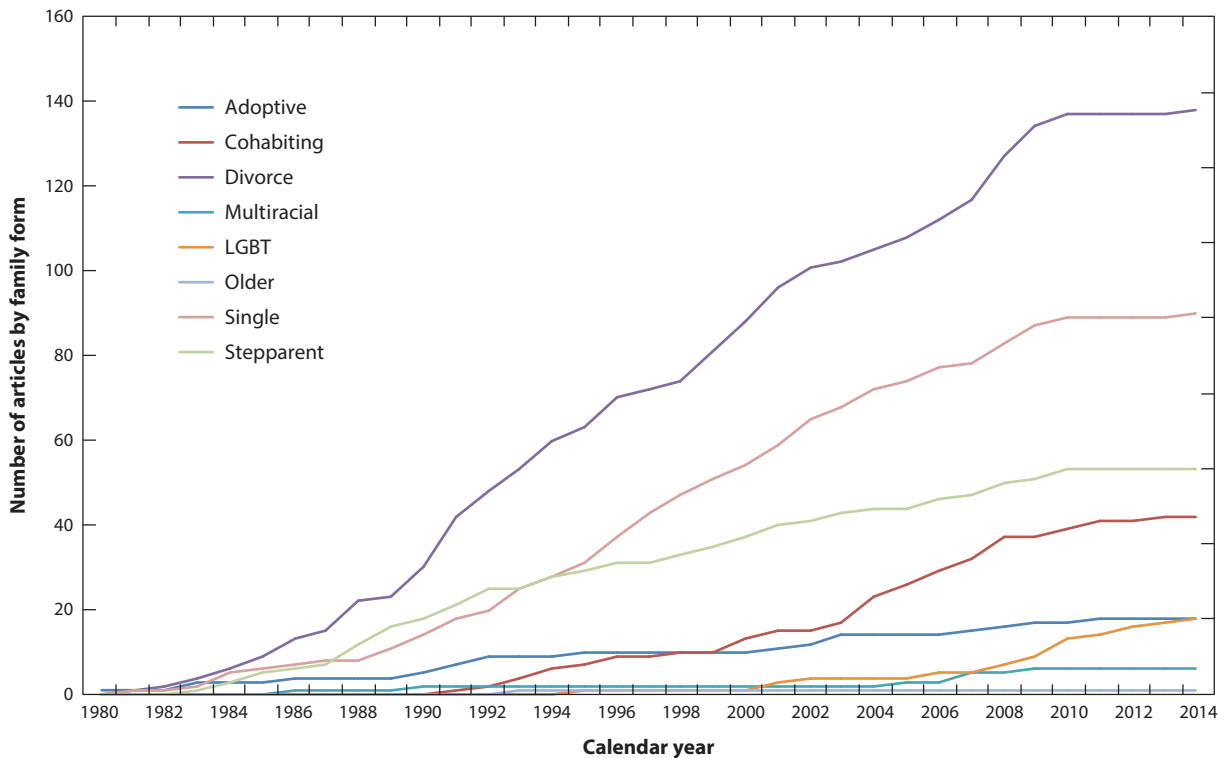
Our review revealed that most research on families with children still assumes and studies the SNAF. For example, articles often examine topics such as sibling age or spacing effects, patterns and consequences of maternal employment, implications of different childcare arrangements, and gender dynamics of housework—all the while assuming the family is composed of a mother, a father, and their biological child(ren). Research on race and families with children is often confined to those that are monoracial—for example, comparing family processes as they occur in a black family versus a white family. Rarely are interracial couples explicitly considered. Parental age, if studied at all, tends to be inserted as a control rather than examined directly. Similarly, adoptive families are often excluded from studies or categorized with other families according to marital status.

A relatively smaller but important body of scholarship explicitly examines alternative families with children. **Figure 1** maps the cumulative number of articles on alternative families with children by topic from 1980 to 2014. As this figure vividly demonstrates, there are still disparities in research on alternative family structures. Articles on divorced and single-parent families dominate, followed by stepparents and cohabiting families. For this reason, as noted earlier, we use the literature on single-parent, stepparent, and cohabiting households primarily as reference points rather than a central focus of the review.

In some cases, research on alternative families with children follows important trends in public awareness and policy. That is, as family forms become more numerically prevalent and/or salient to political or social discourse, sociological research on the topic increases. For example, research on divorced families, single-parent families, and blended families with stepparents grew rapidly

<sup>5</sup>We included writings from these journals only if they (a) focused on families in the United States; (b) were full-length articles instead of research notes, comments, or book reviews; and (c) considered children under the age of 18 years.

<sup>6</sup>There is some overlap in these categories; for example, stepparents are often brought into families that were previously single-parent families or had experienced divorce. We counted each article as discussing as many family forms as were relevant.



**Figure 1**

Cumulative number of articles from *American Journal of Sociology*, *American Sociological Review*, *Annual Review of Sociology*, and *Journal of Marriage and Family* that focused on alternative family forms with children, 1980–2014.

beginning in the early 1990s, after the prevalence of those family forms began to increase in the United States. Current census data suggest that approximately one-third (32%) of households with children under 18 years old are single-parent families; estimates for stepfamilies are hampered by definitional issues but fall in the 8–20% range (Fields 2001, Stewart 2007, Vespa et al. 2013). These changes are part of a major demographic transition that began in the United States during the 1960s and accelerated through the 1970s and 1980s (McLanahan 2004), and also reflect the availability of no-fault divorce throughout the United States by 1985.

The same pattern is seen for scholarship on LGBT families with children, more specifically, for scholarship focused on gay and lesbian couples with children under 18 years old. In 2004, Massachusetts became the first state in the nation to legalize same-sex marriage. Other states followed suit. Since 2010, there has been an increased flurry of federal court-level activity, culminating with the case of *Obergefell v. Hodges* (2015), in which the US Supreme Court overturned marriage bans in the remaining 13 states that continued to prohibit same-sex marriage—opening same-sex marriage to couples nationwide. The shifting legal context may have been instrumental in the dramatic self-reported growth in same-sex households, which considerably outpaced growth in different-sex households (Gates 2012). Academic research on LGBT families with children showed a corresponding increase. Notably, the *Journal of Marriage and Family* was a primary driver; over one-third of the articles on alternative families with children published in this journal covered some aspect of LGBT families.

Increases in stepparent and same-sex families with children, in which a nonbiological parent may adopt a partner's biological child, may account for the growing attention to adoption among scholars (March & Miall 2000). A rapid rise in international and transracial adoptions starting in the late 1970s and peaking in 2004 also brought adoption into the media—and academic—spotlight (Kreider & Lofquist 2014). By 2004, the National Survey of Adoptive Parents estimated that approximately one-fourth (25%) of all adoptive children not adopted by stepparents were adopted internationally, although these numbers subsequently have decreased due to stricter international regulations (Vandivere et al. 2009). As much as two-fifths (40%) of non-stepparent adoptions are transracial, transethnic, or transcultural (Vandivere et al. 2009).

Although research sometimes follows demographic and social trends, it is by no means the standard trajectory. For example, although the frequency of interracial and interethnic marriage has more than doubled in the past 30 years, from 7% of marriages in 1980 to 15% in 2010 (Wang 2012), our analysis identified only six articles that seriously considered interracial/interethnic couples with children. The inattention to interracial families with children is particularly surprising given the large increases among certain groups, for example, a fivefold increase in black/white and a tenfold increase in Asian/white married couples since 1960 and a tripling of Hispanic/non-Hispanic marriages since 1970 (Rosenfeld & Kim 2005; also see Qian & Lichter 2007).

An academic lag is also visible in research on older parents. The major demographic transition that began in the 1960s also included a rising age at marriage and first childbirth (McLanahan 2004). These changes have also been occurring in most industrialized, Western nations. Over the past four decades in the United States, there has been an increase in the number and percentage of births to women over 35 years old; from 2000 to 2012, first birthrates for women 40–44 years old also rose approximately 35% (Mathews & Hamilton 2009). Although the age of first-time parents is continually increasing, only one article that seriously considered older families with children was published in the journals under consideration.

One of the notable features of scholarship on alternative families with children is the persistent focus on children's well-being. Of the 282 articles published on alternative families with children, over four-fifths (82%) explicitly considered some facet of child outcomes (e.g., academic; psychological; or material, in the form of investments from parents). Adult members of these families, and issues that typically occupy general research on families with children, are often overlooked. There is also a tendency to make comparisons with the SNAF. In many cases, this is done with the goal of critically assessing assumptions about the inferiority of a particular family form. However, this approach may inadvertently center the SNAF as the standard against which other families are judged.

## THEORETICAL APPROACHES

The questions of how, through what processes, and to what extent family forms influence children's well-being have been approached from at least four general frameworks. We refer to them here as (*a*) family structure, (*b*) evolutionary, (*c*) characteristics, and (*d*) context theories. Most scholarship developing these explanations seeks to explain apparent disparities in child academic performance and well-being among single- and stepparent families (Astone & McLanahan 1991, Dawson 1991, Pong & Ju 2000, Stewart 2007, Zill 1996). The first two frameworks posit direct effects of family form on youth, whereas the second two highlight primarily indirect effects.

Family structure theories are premised on the idea that traditional family structures—typically defined as families with a biological father and mother—are intrinsically more effective, offering youth an advantage (Amato 2005, Popenoe 1999, Wilcox & Lerman 2014). These explanations suggest that deviating from the SNAF creates structural deficiencies and ambiguities. For example, Cherlin & Furstenberg (1994) describe stepfamilies as an “incomplete institution,” as

there are no clear roles for family members to play. These uncertainties are believed to lead to strain and reduced family functioning. Similarly, Sun (2003) contends that children from nonbiological households receive reduced levels of cultural, interactional, and social resources relative to those in biological households.

The social sciences also have imported evolutionary theories that view alternative family structures as flawed. Kin selection theory treats parental investment as a form of reproductive survival, whereby parents, especially mothers, invest more in biological offspring to ensure the continuation of the line (Buss 1995, Salmon 2005, Smith 1988, Trivers 1972). This genetic link is at the heart of the traditional family structure and is viewed as the source of advantages for biological children. Evolutionary scholars often cite stepfamily studies, especially those with stepfathers, to support the tenets of kin selection theory; stepfathers may be less likely to provide resources like direct care or monetary support, and some evidence suggests children in stepfamilies experience higher rates of abuse and neglect (Anderson et al. 1999, Daly & Wilson 1998, Zvoch 1999).

The characteristics approach is not rooted in deficiencies of family forms themselves. Instead, it highlights sociodemographic features that are often associated with particular family structures as causal factors in children's outcomes. Characteristics theories also have been based on family forms that are associated with reduced resources for children. Specifically, much of this work arose from scholarship challenging the pathology of patriarchy, in which single-mother households are viewed as detrimental to children. Downey (1994) and Biblarz & Raftery (1999) show that it is often not family structure per se but related characteristics (e.g., lower parental income and less occupational prestige) that make particular alternative family forms less advantageous for children. Accounting for these factors reduces the benefits associated with traditional family structures, such that children from single-mother households have similar levels of educational success.

The fourth theory is the most nascent and suggests that the characteristics associated with alternative families are not static. Rather these features (and their effects) are contextual and vary with the social, legal, economic, and political climate. For example, a considerable body of comparative work indicates that single parenthood need not be associated with lower levels of maternal education and higher levels of poverty (Houseknecht & Sastry 1996, McLanahan & Garfinkel 1995). Where national policies equalize or at least minimize the differences in resources between single- and two-parent families, the achievement gap for children in these family forms is significantly reduced, or even becomes nonexistent (Pong et al. 2003). Scholarship also suggests that other family structure patterns, such as the negative effect of increasing sibship size on parental investment (Conley 2004, Downey 2001; but see Guo & VanWey 1999), are mediated by social and educational policy (Park 2008, Steelman et al. 2002, Xu 2008).

The alternative family structures discussed in more detail below offer a unique test of explanations often used to explain low levels of parental investment, and associated poor academic performance, among children in single and stepparent families. Basing theories primarily, if not solely, on these family forms has led some scholars to assume that deviation from traditional family structures is problematic for children. Furthermore, the mechanisms through which these assumed effects occur have been obscured by features of the specific cases around which more general theories have been devised. We maintain that a broader consideration of alternative family forms, including families with older parents, adoptive parents, same-sex parents, and parents in interracial relationships, is necessary to gain a better understanding of how and why alternative families differ from the SNAF.

## **OLDER "PARENT" FAMILIES**

Approximately 10% (up from 7% in 1992) of children in the United States live with a grandparent (Ellis & Simmons 2014). These households may be multigenerational (e.g., include a child, parent,



and grandparent) or skip a generation (e.g., include a child and grandparent) (Goodman 2007). The number of grandfamilies is increasing in response to declining economic opportunities and reduced welfare support for families (Pebbley & Rudkin 1999). These families tend to be of lower income and are more heavily clustered among black, Latino, and Asian populations (Vespa et al. 2013). They often form in response to financial, psychological, or physical challenges faced by parents (Goodman & Silverstein 2001, Pebley & Rudkin 1999).

Research on the effects of grandfamilies on youth is scant but suggestive of positive effects, indicating that grandparents may offer important support systems for parents and their children in times of need. For example, Sun & Li (2014) conclude that coresidence with grandparents is perhaps the only form of what they term “family instability” that is not detrimental to, and even shows benefits for, the cognitive development of infants aged 9 months. Relatedly, others suggest that grandmothers in particular may also benefit from the strong family ties to other generations that arise in grandfamilies (Goodman & Silverstein 2001).

Families headed by parents of advanced age are more common than grandfamilies. In 2008, one in seven babies (or 14%) were born to women who were at least 35 years old (Taylor et al. 2010a). The rising age at first birth reflects increasing delays of normative family transitions, particularly among well-educated women. Of new mothers aged 35 years and older, over two-thirds (71%) had at least some college education, in contrast to nearly three-fifths (58%) of mothers in their late twenties and approximately one-third (36%) in their early twenties (Taylor et al. 2010a). Older mothers are also much more likely to be married and less likely to be black or Latino than younger mothers (Taylor et al. 2010a).

The increasing age of parents represents a profound and understudied shift in the composition of families—one with educational consequences for children. Extending classic resource allocation arguments, Mare & Tzeng (1989) and Powell et al. (2006) indicate that children born to older parents are advantaged. Both maternal and paternal ages are positively linked to an array of educational benefits, including educational expectations and financial, cultural, and interactional resources. This pattern is evident at the bivariate levels and remains with the addition of sociodemographic controls. Parental investments are important for youths, as they have been consistently linked to higher educational attainment (Alexander et al. 1997, Blau & Duncan 1967, Coleman 1988, Sewell & Hauser 1975).

The educational benefits of older parents are corroborated by research. For example, Spieker et al. (1999) find that school-related problem behaviors decrease with maternal age. Similarly, Kalmijn & Kraaykamp (2005) report that maternal age is positively related to children’s educational attainment. In contrast, children born to teen mothers may be at greater risk for low academic performance than those born to older mothers (Brooks-Gunn & Furstenberg 1986, Dahinten et al. 2007).

Several explanations can account for the educational advantages offered by older parents. They may be more mature, having had time to develop preference structures, values, social networks, goals, and experiences that facilitate parental investments well before becoming parents (Heuvel 1988, Mirowsky & Ross 1992). Older parents also have had more time to complete their education, develop careers, and become economically stable, thus facilitating a transfer of resources to their offspring (Featherman & Spenner 1988, Ross & Mirowsky 1999). This explanation strongly suggests that the effects of maternal age operate indirectly via the mother’s income, education, and class background (Geronimus et al. 1994, Levine et al. 2001).

Indeed, more privileged individuals tend to receive the parental financial support and encouragement necessary to delay adult responsibilities in favor of more time for academic and career development (Furstenberg et al. 2004). Privileged youth often experience an extended young adult life stage, setting them on fundamentally different trajectories than their less advantaged



peers (Osgood et al. 2004). When they do become parents, these individuals have had longer to build the credentials and skills that translate into economic security. They, in turn, offer these same resources to their children [e.g., see Flint's (1997) work on the intergenerational effect of paying for children's college].

The experiences of privileged and less privileged youth may be aptly described as "diverging destinies" (McLanahan 2004). Poor and minority youth are more likely to experience family structures (i.e., single parenthood and teen motherhood) associated with costs for youth, whereas generally beneficial features like older parenthood and marriage are concentrated among highly educated whites (also see Goldstein & Kenney 2001). The bifurcation of family structures in the most recent demographic transition is likely to exacerbate existing class-based and racially patterned inequities for youth.

## ADOPTIVE FAMILIES

No official counts of adopted families exist, in part because they can be formed in many different ways. Best estimates suggest that approximately 7% of American youth under 18 years old live with an adoptive parent of some kind (Kreider & Lofquist 2014). Despite a recent spike in international adoptions, most adoptions are still domestic and can occur through the foster system (Fisher 2003). The characteristics of adopted youth have changed, with a decrease in healthy white infants (Fisher 2003). It is only in the past few decades that the rates of cross-racial and cross-cultural adoptions by American couples noticeably increased (Altstein & Simon 1990). Many adoptive parents are also same-sex couples (Johnson & O'Connor 2002).

Adoptions may involve extended family members or those outside of the biological family. Relative and nonrelative adopters are two distinct sets of parents. Relatives who adopt have, on average, lower levels of education and income and are more likely to be black. Children in these families remain in circumstances that closely mirror those at birth. By comparison, nonrelative adopters tend to be well educated (with at least some college), have higher levels of income, and are predominately white; they are also older than the general population (Bachrach et al. 1991, Fisher 2003, Stolley 1993). International adopters tend to be the most privileged, as this process is both difficult and expensive (Vandivere et al. 2009). Their children experience a considerable change in life conditions, often moving to new countries and cultures and into families with far more resources. Although many children who are adopted by nonrelatives enjoy the benefits of higher socioeconomic status, the racial or ethnic differences between child and parent at times can result in children of color struggling with their racial identities and white parents being ill equipped to address issues pertaining to race and racism in the United States (Samuels 2009).

Variation in adoptive family circumstances presents a challenge in making generalizations about effects on children. There are two typical but problematic approaches, both of which result in a finding of negative outcomes for adoptive youth. One approach is to combine adoptive families (regardless of type) and to include other nonbiological living arrangements, despite the possibility of disparate patterns. For example, Case et al. (2001) find that adoptive children, when combined with foster children and stepchildren, attain one less year of education than biological children. A second approach relies on clinical populations, in which adoptive parents have sought help for their children's social, educational, or emotional issues. Not surprisingly, this approach overestimates the incidence of behavioral problems, as the population is not representative of adoptive children as a whole (Bimmel et al. 2003).

A more productive approach is to isolate specific types of adoptive families within nationally representative data. Using inferential techniques, Hamilton et al. (2007) located nonrelative adopters in a nationally representative sample of first graders. They sought to investigate how, and

to what degree, adoptive family structures shape parental provision of many different educational resources. Analyses at the bivariate level indicate that two-adoptive parent families invest more in their children than any other family type, including two-biological parent families. The higher education, better income, and older age of adoptive parents accounted for some of this advantage. However, an adoptive advantage was present even in analyses with sociodemographic controls.

The findings of Hamilton et al. (2007) are inconsistent with the predictions of both family structure and evolutionary theories that point to the inherent benefits of traditional family structures. Nonrelative adoptive families provide the strongest possible test as, unlike in stepfamilies, there are no biological ties between parents and children. Hamilton and colleagues' findings suggest that alternative family structures are not functionally impaired in the absence of blood connections, as suggested by the family structure theories described above. Nor does a genetic link necessarily dictate greater parental willingness to offer educational resources to youth, as suggested by evolutionary theories.

A context theory best accounts for the findings of Hamilton et al. (2007). They argue that nonrelative adoptive parents invest at high levels to actively compensate for the social, legal, and circumstantial contexts in which adoption occurs. Adoption is still seen as inferior to biological parenthood—"not quite as good as having your own" (Fisher 2003, p. 352)—and is negatively portrayed in the media (Bartholet 1993, Jacobson 2014, Jerome & Sweeney 2014), perhaps motivating efforts to prove parental adequacy. The process itself is long and costly; parents must be committed to carry it through (Bachrach et al. 1991, Kirk 1984). Adoptive parents may also be aware of detrimental preadoption conditions for children that prime the parents to invest money, time, and effort in order to prevent future problems (Miall 1996, Priel et al. 2000, Waggenpack 1998).

Research on the short- and long-term well-being of adoptive children is largely positive. A useful way to assess the influence of adoptive parents is to consider what the lives of children would have been like if they had not been adopted. In a review, Hoksbergen (1999) suggests that adoption improves children's emotional and intellectual well-being beyond that of those who remain in institutions or are replaced with biological families. Lansford et al. (2001) argue that parents and children in adoptive families report levels of relationship quality and well-being similar to those in other family structures. Research also suggests that the compensatory resources of adoptive parents make a difference. For example, in supplementary analyses, Hamilton et al. (2007) argue that the test scores of adoptive children would be lower without the high investments of their parents. By adulthood, Feigelman (1997) shows that adoptive youth look most similar to children of two biological parents with regard to their educational attainment.

## **SAME-SEX FAMILIES**

The best estimates of same-sex families vary considerably and are contingent on the population under consideration and the inferential techniques utilized. According to Gates' (2012) calculations using American Community Survey data from 2011, almost one-fifth (19%) of same-sex couples are raising children under 18 years old. This figure corresponds approximately to 125,000 same-sex couples with 220,000 children. Other estimates from the Williams Institute are more inclusive and indicate that as many as 6 million children and adults have an LGBT parent (Gates 2013).

Same-sex families have grown considerably over the past few decades. Some scholars attribute this change in part to the development of a young adult life stage that allowed youth independence from their families and communities of origin. As Rosenfeld (2007) argues, after the 1960s, parents lost much of their ability to control the mating choices of their children, who became more geographically mobile, urban, and disconnected from their hometowns. This created a context in

which living in a nontraditional union that defied social norms was much more possible. Greater public approval of same-sex couples and same-sex marriage, along with legislative actions and court decisions that provide more legal opportunities to same-sex couples, has only accelerated the growth of this family form.

An array of family structures, including those with bisexual and transgendered parents, diverge from assumptions about parental sexuality and/or gender composition inherent in the SNAF. Unfortunately, however, the limited—but growing—research on children’s well-being in these family forms is primarily confined to same-sex parents. Similarly, far more is known about families headed by lesbian mothers than those headed by gay fathers (Biblarz & Stacey 2010). Most of the extant scholarship on this topic has been constrained by small sample sizes, difficulties in identifying gay and lesbian couples in existing data sets, and the considerable heterogeneity within same-sex families (Meezan & Rauch 2005).<sup>7</sup> As discussed below, not all of the techniques that scholars have used to overcome these challenges have been constructive.

Theories about how same-sex parenthood affects children can be grouped into roughly two groups. A small group of social scientists explicitly posits a deficit model in which same-sex families are impeded by the absence of two heterosexual parents who are biologically related to their children and by the absence of role models from both men and women (Regnerus 2012, Sullins 2015, Wardle 1997). Regnerus’s (2012) study of the New Family Structures Survey (NFSS) is perhaps the best-known example. Regnerus asserts that children’s success in adulthood in multiple domains is more likely if they lived with their married mother and father throughout their childhood and especially if their parents remained married even after the children reached adulthood. He posits that the decrease in the number of intact biological mother/biological father families will prove disadvantageous for children and families.

The analysis of small subsamples like same-sex families, however, is particularly dependent on researchers’ analytical decisions. Cheng & Powell (2015) revisited the NFSS and identified numerous possibilities for the misclassification of respondents as having been raised by parents in a same-sex romantic relationship, as well as other measurement, modeling, and coding issues (also see Paik 2015). In reanalyzing the NFSS, Cheng & Powell (2015) show that once potential errors are accounted for, most of the supposed disadvantages reported by Regnerus for respondents raised in either single- or two-parent lesbian mother households and gay father households disappear. The very few remaining “disadvantages” are either normative judgments imposed by Regnerus (2012) (e.g., whether a respondent identifies as entirely heterosexual) or artifacts of a very small number of highly influential cases. Others have also identified coding problems in Sullins’s (2015) claim that children raised in same-sex households have a higher incidence of ADHD than biological children of heterosexual married couples (Cohen 2015). Meanwhile, others fault Regnerus’s conclusions for not adequately attending to the transitory nature of family structure and thereby confounding family transitions with family structures. Rosenfeld (2015) offers compelling evidence that any putative negative effects of being raised by same-sex parents are not due to family structure per se but instead to family transitions.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Although they recognize the challenges coming from studies of small-scale convenience samples, Meezan & Rauch (2005) also see great strengths in some of these studies—especially those that rely on matched pairs of lesbian and heterosexual mothers (e.g., Brewaeys et al. 1997, Chan et al. 1998). For an elaboration of the family instability hypothesis that the effects of family structure are secondary to—or disappear after accounting for—family transitions, see Fomby & Cherlin (2007). For empirical evidence in support of this hypothesis, see Cavanagh (2006), Carlson & Corcoran (2001), Wu (1996), and Wu & Martinson (1993). For empirical evidence challenging this hypothesis, see Auhinbaugh et al. (2005).

<sup>8</sup>For a comparable debate regarding the import of distinguishing between family structure and family transitions, see the exchange between Allen et al. (2013) and Rosenfeld (2013).

A second, and larger, group of scholars finds minimal evidence of negative effects of same-sex parenting on children. Recent amicus curiae briefs to the US Supreme Court filed by the American Sociological Association (2013, 2015) summarize this research on children's academic performance and cognitive development (Potter 2012, Rosenfeld 2010), social development and mental health (Fedewa & Clark 2009, Lamb 2012, Tasker 2005, Wainright & Patterson 2008), and incidence of risky or problematic behaviors (Gartrell et al. 2012, Patterson & Wainright 2012, Wainright & Patterson 2006). Taken together, this body of work suggests that children of same- and opposite-sex parents are more similar than different (for comprehensive reviews, also see Adams & Light 2015, Moore & Stambolis-Ruhstorfer 2013, Stacey & Biblarz 2001).

Some studies even suggest that same-sex parents, especially in two-mother households, may show the highest level of parenting skills and interactions with children (Bos et al. 2007, Crowl et al. 2008, Flaks et al. 1995, Golombok et al. 2003). Like much scholarship on same-sex families, these studies are typically and necessarily based on small, nonrepresentative samples (but see Prickett et al. 2015). Still, Biblarz & Stacey (2010) conclude that the published evidence to date is not inconsistent with the position that two women are better parents at least in some domains than are a father/mother couple, especially a man and woman who have a gendered division of labor. Whether the posited parenting advantages translate into long-term cognitive, social, or psychological benefits for children is unclear (Biblarz & Stacey 2010).

Although more research is needed, early evidence of highly skilled parenting among same-sex couples points to the social and legal context in which they exist. Like adoptive families and other family forms that face adversity (e.g., social stigma, blocked access to a full set of legal and economic benefits), same-sex families may engage in compensatory strategies that both display and build strong family relationships. Parenthood is also more difficult to achieve for many same-sex parents, especially gay couples, and is often the result of explicit (and expensive) choices, such as artificial insemination, surrogacy, and adoption (Stacey 2006). The "daunting routes" to becoming same-sex parents may create investment in this role, and freedom from the limiting scripts that structure traditional marriages has the potential to facilitate quality family relationships (Biblarz & Stacey 2010). Again, the evidence regarding the possible benefits of same-sex parenting is preliminary at best. But what is clear is that the cumulative evidence to date offers little reason to believe that children fare worse being raised by two parents of the same sex than by a mother and father.

## MULTIRACIAL FAMILIES<sup>9</sup>

One out of every seven new marriages in the United States is interracial or interethnic (Taylor et al. 2010b). Currently, 28% of Asians, 26% of Hispanics, and 17% of blacks (as compared to 9% of whites) marry outside of their race/ethnicity (Wang 2012). Correspondingly, the number of multiracial children has grown rapidly, comprising approximately 4% of all children and 10% of children younger than one year of age (Cheng 2004, Parker et al. 2015). Among multiracial babies, black/white (36%) and Asian/white (24%) parents are among the most common (Parker et al. 2015).

The rapid increase of multiracial families is related to the same increase in youth independence that supported the development of same-sex families (Rosenfeld 2007). Important legal changes,

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<sup>9</sup>We use the term multiracial to refer to families in which multiple races or ethnicities are represented among parents and children. We do so in part for simplicity, although in reporting the findings of others, we use the terminology of the original articles. Our approach also recognizes that some, but not all, individuals may experience their ethnic status as a lived racial category (Brown et al. 2006).

such as the US Supreme Court decision in *Loving v. Virginia* (1967) that rendered antimiscegenation laws unconstitutional, also paved the way for interracial couples (Moran 2001). At the same time, military and economic factors, for example, so-called war brides from several Asian countries with US military involvement, have increased the number and visibility of interracial marriages. Selective immigration laws have also brought new populations, including educated elites from India and China and unskilled laborers from Mexico and Central America; these individuals have married into the US population, contributing to the rise in multiracial families (Donato et al. 2008, Jacobs & Labov 2002).

Earlier social science scholarship viewed biracial identities as damaging, echoing similar attitudes among the public (Thornton 1996). Park (1928), for example, believed that biracial individuals met the qualifications for the notion of the “marginal man” who is forced to live in two antagonistic cultures and, in turn, will experience psychological problems and social maladjustment. The public has often applied a similar framework to children of multiracial families, assuming that they will face unique difficulties with self-concept formation and identity development (Korgen 1998, Tizard & Phoenix 1993).

These assumptions are not consistent with research on multiracial youth. For example, Campbell & Eggerling-Boeck (2006) use a nationally representative sample of adolescents to examine how multiracial youth (defined in two different ways) compare to monoracial peers on measures of depression, suicidal intent, feelings of social acceptance, closeness to schoolmates, and participation in extracurricular activities. Excluding those with American Indian and white heritage, they find no evidence that multiracial adolescents, as a group, face additional problems as a function of their family structure. Similarly, Phinney & Alipuria (1996) find that multiethnic students do not have lower self-esteem than monoethnic students.

Much of the limited sociological work on multiracial youth focuses on educational outcomes. This is not surprising, given that sociologists have long viewed race as a central mechanism through which family transmits advantage or disadvantage to children (Coleman et al. 1966, Kao & Thompson 2003, Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell 1999). Multiracial families are unique in that educational processes and decisions are filtered through two or more racial traditions and statuses (Herring 1992, Kao 1999, Radina & Cooney 2000).

Studying multiracial youth can be challenging because of potential variation in educational outcomes and processes among the various sex and race compositions of interracial couples. For example, the effect of living in a black father/white mother household may be different than growing up in an Asian mother/white father household. In their analysis of how biracial families compare to monoracial families in the transmission of educational resources, Cheng & Powell (2007) consider each potential grouping separately. They find that biracial families, with the exception of black father/white mother families, offer an educational advantage, in the form of cultural and economic resources, to youth beyond that available in monoracial families. This evidence suggests a compensatory mechanism, similar to that operating in adoptive families. This mechanism, however, does not extend to social and interactional resources. Biracial families may not be able to overcome some social and structural constraints; for example, the social stigma they face may limit parents’ abilities to form social ties at the school.

Whether increased parental investments for most multicultural youth actually translate into educational advantages is less clear. Cheng (2004) shows that multiracial kindergarteners outperform their monoracial peers, a pattern that is attributable in part to greater educational resources. However, this performance edge gradually fades, even reversing by the time that multiracial youth become adolescents. This reversal may be related to school and peer group racial composition, along with a potentially hostile school climate and damaging racial views in the United States (Aschaffenburg & Maas 1997, Cheng & Klugman 2010). Multiracial adolescents may also

compensate for the difficulties of living in a society that values a singular racial status by creating more expansive social networks that may aid them with future achievement and attainment trajectories (Cheng & Lively 2009).

Research suggests the importance of the school, community, and national context in which multiracial families are embedded. However, much more work is necessary. The complex, often countervailing, and sometimes group-specific processes that define the experiences of multiracial youth underscore the importance of research on long-term outcomes. For example, we know very little about how multiracial children fare in postsecondary education and as adults, and the implications of parental investments for children's well-being once they reach adulthood; most scholarship on multiracial adults is focused on issues of self-classification and racial identity (Renn 2004). The recent inclusion of multiracial racial categorization options in the national census offers considerable potential for future research and may help to solve some of the data issues that have plagued research on this topic.

## CONCLUSION

The theoretical edifice often used to assess family forms is built on the legacy of the SNAF as a dominant cultural image and is frozen in a time when families were more homogenous than they are today. As a point of comparison, much research focuses on single- and stepparent families, which were—until recently—the most visible alternatives. This scholarship consistently documents disadvantages for youth in nontraditional forms, as compared to those in two-biological parent families, and forms the basis of evidence seemingly supporting the family structure and evolutionary theories that scholars have attempted to apply to all families not fitting the specifications of the SNAF.

We believe that it is time to base family theory on a richer array of family forms. Our review broadens the definition of alternative family types, varying parent-child connections and/or demographic features of the parenting couple. Although we acknowledge the rich diversity internal to alternative family groups, we examine scholarship documenting the impact of older-parent families, adoptive families, same-sex families, and multiracial families on the well-being of children. Our more inclusive approach provides a more informed basis for claims about the importance of family structure—or lack thereof—and the mechanisms through which it might matter for youth.

Taken as a whole, research on alternative families vigorously challenges a deficit model of family structure in which deviation from a two-, relatively young, biological, heterosexual, monoracial parent family carries costs for children. In fact, much of the evidence presented in this review suggests that many alternative family types not only cause no harm for children but are associated with additional advantages. These often come in the form of high parental investments that surpass even those in more traditional family arrangements, as is the case for older, adoptive, and interracial parents (Cheng & Powell 2007, Hamilton et al. 2007, Powell et al. 2006). In addition, some evidence points to the possibility of unique parenting skills among two-mother households (Biblarz & Stacey 2010). These patterns run directly counter to family structure and evolutionary explanations.

We found strong support for characteristics and contextual approaches, which focus on the indirect effects of family structure. Alternative families can offer children benefits when they are associated with higher parental socioeconomic status (i.e., older parents and adoptive parents) or limit the benefits available to children when associated with reduced economic security (i.e., single-parent families and stepfamilies). Our review also emphasizes the importance of the social climate. In many alternative family forms, parents may work hard to compensate for the potential difficulties of growing up in a social world that privileges the SNAF. Often, they are largely



successful. However, some challenges may be difficult to overcome. Multiracial families, for instance, encounter social stigma that makes it hard for parents to form the kinds of social ties that facilitate their children's academic success.

The most productive approach may actually be a blend of two frameworks, that is, viewing family characteristics in context. This approach first considers the features, for example, income, time, cultural knowledge, and social ties, that parents need to help their children succeed educationally, psychologically, and physically. The next step is to examine how contextual factors, such as the nature of the welfare state, economic opportunities, social support systems, public acceptance of family forms, and legal rights associated with family, help to shape the availability of valuable resources to particular family forms. In most cases, characteristics that may seem inherent to certain family types are instead features of the environments in which families are located. A compelling illustration of this type of thinking comes from international research highlighting single-parent families in the United States as victims of inadequate social policies, not of structural pathologies or even inevitable resource deficiencies (Houseknecht & Sastry 1996, McLanahan & Garfinkel 1995, Pong et al. 2003).

Although scholarship on alternative families is growing, a great deal of work lies ahead. Some of the biggest changes—for example, the increasing age of parents and rise of multicultural families—remain vastly understudied. Most research focuses exclusively on how children fare in alternative family types without following youth as they transition into adult careers and form families. We know very little about the experiences of other family members in alternative family structures, nor does much research take an explicitly international or comparative lens. For example, how do same-sex families fare in countries where LGBT rights are longer standing and more protected or in countries where same-sex families face an even more unforgiving climate? Future research should also do a better job of acknowledging the great diversity of alternative families—moving beyond the statuses that mark them as alternative to traditional notions of family.

Answering these questions will require better data. Many of the family structures discussed here are not clearly specified on national surveys and require the careful use of inferential techniques (Hamilton et al. 2007). Although nationally representative data sets often oversample subpopulations of interest (e.g., blacks or Latinos), this step has not yet been taken for nontraditional families (Cheng & Powell 2005). There are techniques that quantitative scholars can use to help address issues presented by small sample sizes for alternative families (Cheng & Powell 2005); however, many have responded by studying these family forms through qualitative methods alone. This approach certainly yields invaluable insights but may be less effective in identifying generalizable patterns.

The importance of studying a broad range of families extends beyond academia into the realm of policy formation. For example, decisions about family rights—such as the ability to marry and adopt—often revolve around claims about children's welfare in alternative families. In the absence of information, inaccurate statements may be used to advance political interests, potentially bolstering (or creating new) social inequities. For example, the Bipartisan Legal Advisory Group (Bipartisan Leg. Advis. Group 2013) of the US House of Representatives filed an amicus curiae brief opposing same-sex marriage. In it, they advanced a family structure argument, stating, “[B]iological differentiation in the roles of mothers and fathers makes it rational to encourage situations in which children have one of each” (p. 2). They also took an evolutionary approach: “Biological parents have a genetic stake in the success of their children” (p. 2) that other types of parents do not share. Notably, nearly 50 years ago, similar “children will be harmed” arguments were used by opponents of interracial marriage in *Loving v. Virginia* (1967).

Views on alternative families are changing rapidly—far outpacing the typically glacial pace of most public opinion shifts. For example, Powell et al. (2006, 2015) document striking changes in



Americans' views on who counts as family. In 2003, approximately half of all Americans considered at least some type of same-sex couple (e.g., a lesbian couple with children) as a family; however, seven years later, two-thirds of Americans were willing to do so. During the same time period, the tide of public opinion also turned on same-sex marriage. In 2003, three-fifths of Americans opposed same-sex marriage. By 2010, more Americans were in favor of same-sex marriage than opposed. These shifts reflect a move toward more inclusive definitions of family, and the pace at which they are occurring portends increasing openness toward alternative family structures in the years to come.

Many alternative families, however, still lack the legal, social, and economic support they need to function optimally. For example, in many states, it is legal for companies to hire and fire on the basis of sexual identity, limiting career opportunities and stability for many same-sex families. Some states are pushing back against the recent US Supreme Court ruling, by sanctioning disparate treatment of same-sex families on the basis of religious freedom. Adoptive, same-sex, and multiracial families still encounter public stigma and discrimination. Ironically, some compensatory responses by parents that have benefitted their children may depend on this negative environment; however, parents should not have to compensate for living in a family form that does not conform to the increasingly outdated SNAF prototype—a model that social science no longer deems more functional or beneficial to children.

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