

“Tripling Up”: The Composition and Dynamic Structure of Multigenerational Households

Robin L. Pleau
University of California, Davis

Research Statement

Multigenerational coresidence, a small subset of intergenerational coresidence, has risen in prevalence in recent years after decades of decline (Pew 2010ab). Multigenerational coresidence is defined as three or more generations living together, or at minimum a grandparent and grandchild dyad. Ten percent of all U.S. children live in multigenerational households (Pew 2010b), up from 6% in 1980 (Sweet and Bumpass 1987). An even greater concentration of very young children, aged 5 and younger, is found in these households: 12% in 2009, up from 8% in 1989.¹ In spite of this recent shift in some children’s living arrangements, little is known about the composition and processes of multigenerational households. In this study, I ask what is the composition of multigenerational households, who transitions into these households, and how the characteristics of transitioners differ from those who remain in the households from one year to the next.

Composition of Multigenerational Households

Previous studies show that extended family coresidence is more prevalent among women and racial minorities, whose members are also more likely to be disadvantaged along lines of education and income (Angel and Tienda 1982; Cox 1999; Deleire and Kalil 2002; Swartz 2009; Thomson, Minkler and Driver 1999; Tienda and Angel 1982). The immigration literature shows that recent immigrants are likely to live with extended family when they first arrive in the U.S. (Burr and Mutchler 1993; Glick 1999; Glick, Bean and Van Hook 1997; Treas and Batalova 2011). This pattern for new immigrants diverges by age; young immigrants are more likely to live with “horizontal” kin (brothers, cousins) and older immigrants are more likely to live with “vertical” kin (children and grandchildren) (Glick 2000). Finally, unmarried young parents, who are also more likely to have lower educational attainment (Cherlin 2010), are probably more likely to live with their own parents to make ends meet.² The composition of multigenerational households, then, should reflect a higher proportion of women, children, unmarried, racial minorities, and immigrants with lower average educational attainment and lower income.

Influences on the Transition into Multigenerational Households

Multigenerational households should have distinctive patterns of dynamic processes, such as family members transitioning into, out of and remaining in these homes. The reasons for this “churning” of household structure is twofold. First, independent living is preferred by most Americans today (Rosenfeld 2007; Ruggles 2007; Seltzer, Strohm and Bianchi 2010). Most Americans prefer to live apart from family members when they can, only relying on familial coresidence when needed. So, this can lead to a “doubling up” or “tripling up” of family

¹ Author’s estimates, using weighted data from the 2005-10 March Current Population Study.

² However, not all nonmarital births are to uncoupled women.

members who have fewer resources to live independently. The second reason is that family serves as a primary safety net for individuals across the life course (Bengtson 2001; Riley and Riley 1993; Silverstein, Gans and Yang 2006; Swartz 2009; Swartz et al. 2011), which suggests that members will transition into family households as physical, social or economic needs arise. These needs may be short-term, such as the need for temporary housing due to “shocks” of unemployment, divorce or the birth of a new baby, or longer-term, such as more permanent caregiving to a family member in poor health or the housing of older immigrants who are unlikely to live independently. Since women are more likely to have lower income, to live with children, and to care for family members across the life course, multigenerational households should house a greater proportion of women than men from one year to the next. In sum, we can expect to find that individuals who *transition into* multigenerational households are more likely to be unemployed, unmarried, and the parent of an infant or very young child. Those who *remain in* these households from year to year are probably more likely to be women, those in poor health or older immigrants.

Hypotheses

I hypothesize that 1) multigenerational households will have on average a greater proportion of women, racial minorities, immigrants, the unemployed, and those in poor health, with lower educational attainment and lower income than two-generation households; 2) the likelihood of an adult transitioning into a multigenerational household (“*transitioners*”) is a function of employment status, marital status, health, and age of youngest child, controlling for other factors; and 3) those remaining in multigenerational households from one year to the next (“*anchors*”) are more likely to be midlife women, immigrants and those in poor health.

Data and Methods

I use data from the 2006-2010 March CPS to examine the composition and processes of multigenerational households. I create a pooled sample of 4 two-year matched panels for the years 2006-07, 2007-08, 2008-09, and 2009-10. The March CPS data originally were not meant for longitudinal use; however, due to the CPS rotation pattern, close to 50% of households are interviewed in two consecutive years. This makes it possible to match these households, creating short, two-year panels (Madrian and Lefgren 2000). Since I am interested in household dynamic processes, I only keep households that are in the sample for two years in order to provide two time points. I limit the sample to 2006-2010 because 2007 is the first year that a key parent-location identifying variable is available. The line number of a household member’s mother and father is identified beginning in 2007, providing analytical detail needed to identify sets of parents and children transitioning into households at time 2. Two other important variables, *hhid2* and *peridnum*, became available in 2005 and 2004, respectively. After eliminating households with invalid matches across years, the final analytic sample consists of 216,609 individuals living in 85,387 households.

To examine the composition of multigenerational households, I use descriptive statistics for the pooled 2006-2010 data. To test the probability of transitioning into multigenerational households as a function of demographic and “shock” characteristics, I estimate binomial logit models using the repeated-panel data. Finally, to test whether coefficient estimates differ

across *transition* and *anchor* models I conduct tests of difference following the *suest* (“seemingly unrelated estimation”) post-estimation command in Stata.

Preliminary Findings

First, I find that U.S. multigenerational households have on average a higher percentage of women, unmarried adults, racial minorities, and immigrants, with poorer health, lower educational attainment, lower household income, and higher rates of both unemployment and poverty, compared to the average U.S. household. Second, I find that adults who *transition into* multigenerational households are on average young, unmarried and unemployed. Half of those who transition into multigenerational households are children, and 26% of all transitioners are under the age of 5. Only 4% of transitioners are 65 and older. Gender is not significant to transitions into these households until interacted with age, educational attainment, race, marital status, and parental status. Although these characteristics are significant determinants of transitioning into multigenerational households for both men and women, the magnitude is greater for women. Third, I find that health and immigrant status are not significant to *transitions into* multigenerational households. However, poor health is significant to *remaining* in these households from one year to the next, suggesting this group’s more permanent residence within multigenerational households.

Finally, Tests of difference between “transitioner” and “anchor” models show that young adults are equally as likely to move in and remain in these households, but that midlife adults (45+) are significantly more likely to anchor than transition in. Others more likely to anchor than transition into multigenerational households are Blacks and those with coresident children 6-17. Those more likely to transition in than remain in these households from year to the next are widows, those separated/divorced, the unemployed, and parents of infants. The greater likelihood of moving into these households for these groups supports the hypothesis that marital, employment and baby “shocks,” primarily for young adults, are the driving forces behind the multigenerational coresidence, at least in the last four years.

References

Angel, Ronald and Marta Tienda. 1982. “Determinants of Extended Household Structure: Cultural Pattern or Economic Need?” *The American Journal of Sociology*, 87(6): 1360-1383.

Bengtson, Vern L. 2001. "Beyond the nuclear family: the increasing importance of multigenerational bonds." *Journal of Marriage & Family*, 63:1-16.

Burr, J.A. and J.E. Mutchler. 1992. “Ethnic Living Arrangements: Cultural Convergence or Cultural Manifestation?” *Social Forces*, 72(1) 169-179.

Cherlin, Andrew J. 2010. “Demographic Trends in the United States: A Review of Research in the 2000s.” *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 72: 403-419.

Cox, Carole B., ed. 1999. *To Grandmother's House We Go and Stay*. New York: Springer Publishing Co.

Glick, Jennifer E. 1999. "Economic Support From and To Extended Kin: A Comparison of Mexican Americans and Mexican Immigrants." *International Migration Review*, 33(3): 745-765.

Glick, Jennifer E. 2000. "Nativity, Duration of Residence and the Life Course Pattern of Extended Family Living in the USA." *Population Research and Policy Review*, 19: 179-198.

Glick, Jennifer E., Frank D. Bean and Jennifer Van Hook. 1997. "Immigration and Changing Patterns of Extended Family Household Structure in the United States: 1970-1990." *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 59: 177-191.

Madrian, B. and L. J. Lefgren. 1999. "A Note on Longitudinally Matching Current Population Survey Respondents." NBER Working Paper T0247.

Pew Research Center. 2010a. "Since the Start of the Great Recession, More Children Raised by Grandparents." Sept. 9. Online. <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1724/sharp-increase-children-with-grandparent-caregivers>.

Pew Research Center. 2010b. "The Return of the Multi-Generational Family Household." Online. <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1528/multi-generational-family-households>.

Riley, Matilda White and John W. Riley. 1993. "Connections: Kin and Cohort." In V. L. Bengtson and W. A. Achenbaum (eds.), *The Changing Contract Across Generations*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

Silverstein, Merrill, Daphna Gans and Frances M. Yang. 2006. "Intergenerational Support to Parents: The Role of Norms and Needs." *Journal of Family Issues* 27: 1068-1108.

Rosenfeld, Michael J. 2007. *The Age of Independence: Interracial Unions, Same-Sex Unions, and the Changing American Family*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Ruggles, Steven. 2007. "The Decline of Intergenerational Coresidence in the United States, 1850 to 2000." *American Sociological Review*, 72(6): 964-989.

Seltzer, Judith A., Charles Q. Strohm and Suzanne M. Bianchi. 2010. "Doubling Up When Times Are Tough: A Study of Obligations to Share a Home in Response to Economic Hardship." On-line Working Paper Series, California Center for Population Research, University of California, Los Angeles. 23 August.

Swartz, Teresa Toguchi. 2009. "Intergenerational Family Relations in Adulthood: Patterns, Variations, and Implications in the Contemporary United States." *Annual Review of Sociology*, 35: 191-212.

Swartz, Teresa Toguchi, Minzee Kim, Mayumi Uno, Jeylan Mortimer, and Kirsten Bengtson O'Brien. 2011. "Safety Nets and Scaffolds: Parental Support in the Transition to Adulthood." *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 73(2): 414-429.

Thomson, Esme Fuller, Meredith Minkler and Diane Driver. 1999. "A Profile of Grandparents Raising Grandchildren in the United States." Pp. 20-33 in Cox, Carole B. (ed.) *To Grandmother's House We Go and Stay*. New York: Springer Publishing Co.

Tienda, Marta and Ronald Angel. 1982. "Headship and Household Composition among Blacks, Hispanics and Other Whites." *Social Forces*, 61(2): 508-531.

Treas, Judith and Jeanne Batalova. 2011. "Residential Independence: Race and Ethnicity on the Road to Adulthood in Two US Immigrant Gateways." *Advances in Life Course Research*, 16(1): 13-24.