

The Quality of Residential Parent-Child Relationships and its Impact on Stepfamily Experiences

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Abstract

This study sought to understand the effect that residential biological parent-child relationship has on retrospective accounts of overall stepfamily experiences. Using data from the Stepfamily Experiences Project (STEP), a nationally-based quota sample, retrospective accounts of 1,593 emerging adults' stepfamily experiences were analyzed. Results indicated that a higher quality residential biological parent-child relationship was positively and significantly correlated with a higher quality stepfamily experience. Clinicians and other social scientists need to be aware of the importance of strengthening the parent-child relationship when providing services and interventions for stepfamilies.

Keywords: family, parent-child relationships, stepfamily, emerging adults

Ten percent of children under the age of 18 live with a biological parent and stepparent (Kreider & Ellis, 2011). A broader statistic is that one-third of children in the U.S. will live in a stepfamily sometime between birth and age 18 (Pace, Shafer, Jensen, & Larson, 2013). Currently, approximately 50% of American marriages end in divorce, a number that has remained fairly consistent for the past generation. Divorce can take its toll on families, especially on the children involved. Research has shown that mothers and fathers often have conflictual interactions with their children immediately following a divorce (Sauer & Fine, 1988). The remarriage of a biological parent and formation of a stepfamily can add a challenging dynamic to a child's life and can cause a considerable amount of stress on the parent-child relationship. The emphasis of the limited amount of research on stepfamilies has been focused on the stepparent-child relationship as well as how divorce affects the parent-child relationship. Interestingly, the quality of the preexisting residential biological parent-child relationship has been often overlooked when measuring the stepfamily experience. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine if the quality of the residential biological parent-child relationship had an effect on stepfamily experiences among emerging adults. The next section examines past research regarding the parent-child relationship as it pertains to stepfamily experience. Further conceptualization of this study's variables are also explored.

Literature Review

Parent-Child Relationship

Following a divorce and remarriage, some parent-child relationships deteriorate (Cartwright, 2005). According to a study conducted by Cartwright (2005), approximately 25% of participants reported the relationship with their parent deteriorated after the stepfamily formation, while approximately 33% claimed their relationship remained close. A higher quality parent-child relationship can assist a child in overcoming or coping with the stresses associated with divorce (Jensen, Shafer, & Holmes, in press). Once in the stepfamily, the familiar pattern of interaction and history is likely to result in a relatively stable relationship between the parent and child, which creates impermeable boundaries (Fine & Kurdek, 1995). This information lends itself to the idea that the familiarity of the preexisting parent-child relationship provides a sense of stability to an otherwise foreign stepfamily formation.

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Mothers play an important role in the transition into a stepfamily because more often than not, children reside with their mothers following a divorce. When children perceive their mothers as responsive, open, and available, children can experience more stability and consistency during dramatic family system changes, and more specifically divorce (Jensen & Shafer, 2013). Children who lived with their mother in a stepfamily had a more positive view on their mother-child relationship than did children who lived with their father (Sauer & Fine, 1988). Children's externalizing behavior, or lack thereof, is associated with maternal maltreatment or strong affective bond with divorce as a mediator (Narayan, Cicchetti, Rogosch, & Toth, 2014; Berg, 2004). A maternal relationship, either negative or positive, is very clearly associated with how a child assimilates to a stepfamily. With respect to the current study, a quality parent-child relationship was defined as warm and close, believing the parent was a good parent, and being able to communicate openly with the parent. These themes are infused through much of the research regarding parent-child relationships. The study by Cartwright (2005) presented themes with regard to problems in the parent-child relationship and in maintaining a close parent-child relationship. Loss of time and attention, lack of consultation and information (about the remarriage), the meaning of the remarriage, the role of the stepparent, and conflict between divorced parents were the themes found in problematic parent-child relationships (Cartwright, 2005). Conversely, time and attention, continuing the role of the parent and taking care of the children, and being considerate of the nonresidential biological parent were themes of maintaining a close relationship between the parent and child (Cartwright, 2005). These positive themes support the previously conceptualized variables of this study.

Impact of Stepfamily Experience on Children

Parent-child relationships certainly play a significant role in a child's life and are affected by divorce. Furthermore, the parent-child relationship must also be considered when evaluating its effects on the stepfamily experience. In stepfamilies, a phenomenon occurs where the biological parent-child relationship tends to precede the new marital relationship (Fine & Kurdek, 1995). Stepfamilies can be less functional and more problematic than nuclear families, which is due to the absence of guidelines and specific role responsibilities, social support for stepfamilies, and boundary ambiguity (Ganong & Coleman, 1997; Coleman, Fine, Ganong, Downs, & Pauk, 2001; Doyle, Wolchik, & Dawson-McClure, 2002). The expectation that stepfamilies will function similarly to nuclear families can often be troublesome and unrealistic (Ganong & Coleman, 1997). Ambiguous expectations for different roles within the stepfamily seems to be the most pressing concern. Relationships between children and stepparents can be more negative and less effective than parent-child relationships in nuclear families (Sauer & Fine, 1988; Dunn, Davies, O'Connor, & Sturgess, 2000). Positive themes in experiences with stepfathers were feeling supported by the stepfather, the contribution to a happy family, appreciation of children, and being cautious about authority (Kinniburgh-White, Cartwright, & Seymour, 2010). Difficult experiences with a stepfather were imposed rules or values, feelings of a divided family, difficulties in negotiating rules and boundaries, and having a difficult personality (Kinniburgh et al., 2010). Additionally, children often desire that their parents maintain support and disciplinary roles following the remarriage (Cartwright, 2005), opposed to a stepparent taking over those roles. This theme of ambiguous boundaries and role responsibility is seen within stepfamilies with the mother being the residential parent. It is interesting to note that a child may be able to draw closer to their stepfather if their mother is more available in terms of communication (Jensen & Shafer, 2013). A child's maladjustment to the transition into the stepfamily may be related to the child's experiences before and after the transition, as well as the child's coping mechanisms (Doyle et al., 2002). Children in stepfather households are typically exposed to more parental conflict, which has a negative correlation with child well-being (Hanson, McLanahan, & Thomson, 1996). In examining different themes and expectations within the stepfamily experience, the question can arise as to how the parent-child relationship impacts these experiences.

Other Factors that Impact Parent-Child Relationships

In addition to the above mentioned influences, the gender of the child may have an impact on the parent-child relationship and how they handle the overall stepfamily experience. With regard to the development of a stepfamily, the stress a parent experiences has an effect on the children. Parental stress was positively related to externalizing behaviors in boys; whereas for girls, it was positively related to internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Doyle et al., 2002). In the same study, they found that self-reported personal stress was positively related to internalizing behaviors for girls and externalizing behaviors in boys. A longitudinal study found boys were more distressed at the time of the divorce, while girls seemed to cope better (Burns & Dunlop, 2000).

Further, boys appeared to recover emotionally from the divorce more so than the girls who showed increased levels of depression and anxiety (Burns & Dunlop, 2000). Thus we can see that there can be a difference in how boys and girls are affected by divorce and how they react to divorce-related stress. Actually living in a stepfather family has different effects on adolescent girls and boys (Berg, 2004). If a mother was consistent and adequately involved with the stepfather integration, boys showed lower levels of problem behavior. If a stepfather was over involved in family matters, girls exhibited more negative behavior (Berg, 2004). Berg's(2004) study also found that the level of respondent education may have an effect on the perceived stepfamily experience. Compared to adults whose parents remained married, adults with divorced parents were less likely to obtain higher education, specifically from a university (Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Bernardi & Radl, 2014). While the research does not specifically review the relationship between education attainment and stepfamily experience, it is important to note these similar trends. This literature review provides the context of what the current study examined with regard to the parent-child relationship and stepfamily experience, taking into account the gender of the child, whether the child lived with a stepfather or stepmother, and educational attainment as contributing factors. While previous research shows a good understanding of how the transition into a stepfamily affects a child and the parent-child relationship, there is still a gap relating the preexisting parent-child relationship to the stepfamily experience. Therefore, the purpose of this study sought to fill that gap and provide new information about how the quality of the parent-child relationship affects the stepfamily experience. The hypothesis was that a better quality residential biological parent-child relationship leads to a better quality stepfamily experience.

Methods

Participants and Procedures

The data used to conduct this research came from the Stepfamily Experience Project (STEP) collected in 2013 by researchers at BYU through Qualtrics. Qualtrics is a research company who specializes in collecting data for universities, non-profit organizations, and corporations (Jensen et al., in press). Respondents included a nationally-based quota sample of 1,593 emerging adults (ages 18 to 30 years old). Qualifying respondents lived in a stepfamily between the ages of 8 and 18 years old. Respondents' accounts were retrospective of their stepfamily experiences. With regard to the demographics of the STEP data, the mean responses for income and education were \$20,000-\$39,000 with over 90% making less than \$80,000. The mode for educational attainment was "some college." There were 660 (41%) respondents who were male and 933 (59%) who were female. The mean age of respondents was 24.67 years old. Approximately 68% of respondents were White, 15% were Latino, 12% were Black/African, 3% were Asian, and 21% were Native American. It is important to note that the STEP data has an oversampling of Native American respondents; however, this study did not specifically analyze this oversampling. About 45% of respondents lived in a simple stepfamily (children from only one parent), 38% lived in a blended stepfamily (children from both parents' previous relationships), and 17% lived in a complex family (children from both parents' previous relationships, with a child from the current relationship). There were 484 respondents who lived with a stepmother and 1,107 lived with a stepfather. For the purpose of this study, our sample included 1,592 respondents for the dependent variable (stepfamily experience) and 1,541 for the independent variable (residential biological parent-child relationship). The recoding of these variables and missing data is further discussed below. See Table 1 for respondent demographics.

Table 1: Descriptive Characteristics of STEP Data Respondents (n=1,593)

	Mean or %	SD	Min	Max
Stepfamily Experience*	3.16	1.14	1	5
Residential Biological Parent-Child Relationship*	3.71	1.21	1	5
Educational Attainment*	3.10	0.93	1	5
Less than high school	3%		0	1
High school or GED	22%		0	1
Some college	44%		0	1
Associate/Bachelor Degree	24%		0	1
Graduate school or above	8%		0	1
Female*	59%		0	1
Lived with a stepdad*	70%		0	1
Current age	24.67	3.91	18	30
Race				
Black/African American	12%		0	1
Asian	3%		0	1
White	68%		0	1
Native American	21%		0	1
Latino	15%		0	1
Other	1%		0	1
Income	2.58	0.85	1	6
None	11%		0	1
Under \$20,000	30%		0	1
\$20,000-\$79,999	52%		0	1
\$80,000-\$139,999	6%		0	1
\$140,000-\$299,999	1%		0	1
\$300,000+	1%		0	1

* Variables used in OLS Regression

Measures

Dependent variable. The dependent variable for this study was the quality of stepfamily experience. The variable was comprised of four measures to create a scale: (1) From what I experienced in my stepfamily, I think stepfamily relationships are safe, secure, rewarding, worth being in, and a source of comfort; (2) We had a loving atmosphere in our stepfamily; (3) From what I experienced in my stepfamily, I think stepfamily relationships are confusing, unfair, anxiety-provoking, inconsistent, and unpredictable (this measure was reverse-coded so that higher values indicated the quality of stepfamily experience; and (4) All things considered, my time living with a stepfamily was happy. Measures were factored together to create the overall composite stepfamily experience scale. The new scale ranged from 1 to 5, where 1="Worst," 2="Bad," 3="Moderate," 4="Good," and 5="Great." The reliability coefficient of the scale was strong ($\alpha = .92$), indicating good internal reliability among the measures.

Independent variable. The independent variable for this study was quality of the residential biological parent-child relationship. This variable was comprised of the following three measures to create a scale: (1) My residential biological parent maintained a close and warm relationship with me; (2) I was able to communicate openly and safely with my residential biological parent; and (3) My residential biological parent was a good parent to me. Responses to these measures were on a Likert-type scale where 1="Strongly Disagree" to 5="Strongly Agree." Measures were factored together to create the overall composite residential biological parent-child relationship scale. The new scale ranged from 1 to 5, where 1="Worst," 2="Bad," 3="Moderate," 4="Good," and 5="Best." The reliability coefficient of the scale was also strong ($\alpha = .89$).

Control variables. Gender was used as a dichotomous control variable where 0="Male" and 1="Female." Whether the respondent lived with a stepfather or stepmother was also used as a control variable. This variable was dichotomous where 0="Lived with Stepmom" and 1="Lived with Stepdad." Educational attainment was used as another control variable.

This variable was dichotomously recoded for descriptive statistics and then treated as a continuous variable for the regression analysis: 1="Less than High School," 2="High School Degree or GED," 3="Some College," 4="Associate/Bachelor Degree," and 5="Graduate School or above."

Data Analysis

The first set of analysis involved descriptive statistics. Using Stata 13, we then performed a series of four Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression analyses (Models 1-4) to assess the relationship between the biological parent-child relationship and stepfamily experience, with gender, residential stepparent gender, and educational attainment as the control variables. Our independent and dependent variables were both continuous, which is why the OLS regression was utilized. The fourth measure in the dependent variable scale (all things considered, my time living with a stepfamily was happy) had one missing response (0.06%), which was removed because it did not adversely affect the power. The questions that comprised the independent variable had an option of "Does not apply." We recoded these responses as missing (3.3%) because this option was not useful in analyzing residential biological parent-child relationships. The control variable of residential stepparent gender had two missing variables (0.13%) that were also removed.

Results

OLS Regression

Table 2 includes the results of OLS regression models examining retrospective reports of the quality of the residential biological parent-child relationship on the quality of stepfamily experience. In Model 1, the regression included only the dependent and independent variables without any control variables. In Models 2-4, one additional control variable was included in each of the regressions. In Model 1, which assessed the residential biological parent-child relationship as it relates to the stepfamily experience, we found that a one-unit increase in the parent-child relationship was associated with a 0.54 unit increase in stepfamily experience ($\beta=0.57, p < 0.001$). This means that as the quality of parent-child relationship increased, the stepfamily experience also increased. This relationship remained significant throughout each model analysis, with the standardized coefficient staying constant ($\beta=0.57$). Model 2 examined the effect respondents' gender had on this relationship. We found that gender was not significantly associated with stepfamily experience with the residential biological parent-child relationship as the independent variable ($\beta=-0.003, B=-0.01$). This variable was not significant throughout each model analysis. The control variable, educational attainment, was included in Model 3. We found that a one-unit increase in respondents' education level was associated with a 0.05 unit increase in stepfamily experience ($\beta=0.04, p < 0.05$). This means that as educational attainment increased, stepfamily experience also increased. Lastly, in Model 4 all control variables were included in the regression (See Table 2). Whether or not the respondent lived with a stepmother or stepfather was not significantly associated with the independent and dependent variable relationship ($\beta=0.02, B=-0.05$). Respondents' gender remained non-significant and educational attainment remained significant.

Table 2: OLS Regression Findings for Variables Affecting Stepfamily Experience (n=1,593)

Stepfamily Experience	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
Biological Parent-Child Relationship	.54	.02	.57**	.54	.02	.57**	.53	.02	.57**	.53	.02	.57**
Gender			*	-.01	.05	-.003	-.01	.05	-.005	-.01	.05	-.006
Education							.05	.03	.04*	.05	.03	.04*
Stepparent Gender										.05	.05	.02
Adjusted R ²			.328			.327			.329			.329

Abbreviations: B=Coefficient; SE=Standard Error; β =Standardized Coefficient

*p < 0.05, **p < 0.001

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between residential biological parent-child relationships and stepfamily experiences. Respondents' gender, educational attainment, and residential stepparent gender were used as control variables to assess additional factors that may affect the independent and dependent variable relationship. The initial hypothesis was that a better quality residential biological parent-child relationship leads to a better quality stepfamily experience. Findings from this study support the overall hypothesis. The results showed that individuals who reported having a better quality relationship with their parent also had an overall better quality stepfamily experience. Throughout each regression model, the relationship between the residential biological parent-child relationship and stepfamily experience remained significant. Previous research also suggested that a better quality relationship can assist a child in transitioning into a stepfamily and coping with divorce (Jensen et al., in press; Fine & Kurdek, 1995; Cartwright, 2005; Jensen & Shafer, 2013). The current study provides an important addition to previous literature in showing a clear association between the quality of the parent-child relationship and a higher quality stepfamily experience. Respondents' educational attainment was the only control variable that was significant. Adults who have divorced parents have a lower rate of obtaining higher education (Amato & Cheadle, 2005; Bernardi & Radl, 2014). This study suggests that a higher education level has a positive effect on stepfamily experience. Because our question did not measure the likelihood of educational attainment for children of divorce, our results can neither support nor dispute what was found in previous literature.

While not significantly correlated, the standardized coefficient of respondents' gender increased throughout each model as more control variables were added. Previous research suggested that boys and girls are affected in different ways behaviorally and emotionally because of the impact of divorce (Doyle et al., 2002; Burns & Dunlop, 2000). This study found that respondents' gender did not have a significant impact on retrospective accounts of stepfamily experience. It was suggested in the literature that stepparent gender, specifically having a stepfather, would have different effects on boys and girls behaviorally (Berg, 2004). Results of the current study show that stepparent gender did not have a significant effect on the stepfamily experience. Only one model was run with stepparent gender, thus the results were based upon the additional variables of residential biological parent-child relationship, respondent gender, and educational attainment.

Limitations

This study has a number of limitations. This study did not take into account respondents' race, religion, or income in assessing stepfamily experience. Doing this may have increased understanding of how cultural factors affect the quality of stepfamily experience. This would also be true for factors related to family structure. Whether the stepfamily was simple (one partner has a biological child), blended (both partners have biological children), or complex (both partners have biological children and partners have new biological children together) may also have an effect on stepfamily experience (Jensen et al., in press). This study assessed stepparent gender, but it would have been helpful if we could have known whether the biological parent was male or female. This information was not available in the STEP data. Another important limitation to note is that the STEP data was from a national-quota sample. While this is one of the largest samples of emerging adults who grew up in step families, this does limit the generalizability of all findings.

Implications

It is crucial that clinicians and other social scientists understand the importance of parent-child relationships, especially in stepfamily formation. Early intervention could impact the success of stepfamily formation by strengthening parent-child relationships. As shown throughout the literature review, stepfamily formation is a difficult transition for all parties involved. Stepfamilies need to be educated on boundaries and how to form relationships with new stepfamily members. Several studies suggest successes and failures in stepfamily relationship expectations (Ganong & Coleman, 1997; Coleman et al., 2001; Doyle et al., 2002). This study echoes these suggestions in creating a higher functioning stepfamily experience. It is important for clinicians to make an effort to strengthen the immediate family relationships in order to create a healthier nuclear family unit or a healthier stepfamily formation. Specifically, clinicians should help parents focus on three things: 1) create a warm and loving relationship with their child, 2) enhance communication skills with their child, and 3) obtain basic parenting skills training. Parents play an important role in helping their child transition into a stepfamily. Clinicians can better educate parents in being a proactive and effective supporter of their children in this transition.

Conclusion

The unfamiliarity of stepfamily formation can prove to be difficult for the children involved. While the overall stepfamily experience is affected by many factors, this study found that the quality of residential biological parent-child relationships can be one of those factors. With living in a stepfamily being a norm for one-third of children, understanding the transition into a stepfamily is crucial. Children who have a better quality relationship with their parent tend to have a better quality stepfamily experience.

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