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## Stepfather Involvement and Stepfather-Child Relationship Quality: Race and Parental Marital Status as Moderators

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### Abstract

Stepparent-child relationship quality is linked to stepfamily stability and children's well-being. Yet, the literature offers an incomplete understanding of factors that promote high quality stepparent-child relationships, especially among socio-demographically diverse stepfamilies. In this study we explore the association between stepfather involvement and stepfather-child relationship quality among a racially diverse and predominately low-income sample of stepfamilies with pre-adolescent children. Using a subsample of 467 mother-stepfather families from year 9 of the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, results indicate that stepfather involvement is positively associated with stepfather-child relationship quality. This association is statistically indistinguishable across racial groups, although the association is stronger among children in cohabiting stepfamilies compared to children in married stepfamilies.

### Keywords

children; family; family interaction; moderation; relationship quality; stepchildren; stepfamily

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Nearly 30% of children in the United States will live in a stepfamily at some point, making stepfamilies one of the fastest growing family forms in the United States (Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet 1995; Pew Research Center, 2011). A stepfamily is formed when an individual brings a child or children from a previous relationship into a new committed relationship (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Stepfamily formation is marked by unique stressors that place children at risk for adjustment problems (Jeynes, 2006; Papernow, 2013; van Eeden-Moorefield & Pasley, 2013). Some stepfamily stressors include conflicting expectations, stepcouple disagreements on parenting, co-parenting conflict, loyalty binds, shifts in parent-child relationships, stepparenting challenges, and clashing family cultures (Jensen, Lombardi, & Larson, 2015; Jensen & Shafer, 2013; Jensen, Shafer, & Larson, 2014; Pace, Shafer, Jensen, & Larson, 2014; Papernow, 2013; Shafer, Jensen, Pace, & Larson, 2014). The link between children's adjustment and stepfamily stress may be compounded for

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stepfamilies comprised of racial minority groups who experience other forms of social and economic disadvantage (Peters & Massey, 1983), although minority groups also exhibit numerous unique strengths (Stewart, 2007).

Consistent with a resilience perspective, stepparent-child relationship quality is a malleable factor that can buffer the influence of stepfamily risk and promote the adjustment (i.e., psychological, behavioral, and physical health) of stepchildren (Coleman, Ganong, & Russell, 2013). Thus, children's perceptions of stepparent-child relationship quality and factors that predict it are crucial for the development of effective stepfamily intervention strategies—a notion receiving continual recognition (see Jensen & Howard, 2015). Further, researchers have called for the exploration of “variation in stepfamily experiences across groups defined by age, gender, race, ethnicity, or social class” (Sweeney, 2010, p. 679), and the value of incorporating “greater socio-demographic diversity on the part of the stepfamilies studied” has been emphasized (Jensen & Howard, 2015, p.51).

The purpose of this study is to assess the association between stepfather involvement (i.e., regular patterns of interaction with the stepchild across numerous domains of family life), an understudied variable, and the child's report of stepfather-child relationship quality. The intersection of this association and diversity is explored via our use of a racially diverse and predominately low-income sample and the assessment of race and parental marital status as moderators. In this paper, the term race is used to include the concept of race (e.g., African American) and ethnicity (e.g., Hispanic origin; Yanow, 2015), matching the parsimonious nature of sociodemographic measures in the secondary data we used to conduct our analyses.

## Literature Review

Stepparent-child relationship quality represents the extent to which stepparents and children are satisfied with their relationship and feel close to one another (Jensen & Howard, 2015). Relationship quality between stepparents and children may stem from or indicate a growing sense of attachment marked by emotional availability, responsiveness, and engagement (Johnson, 2004). High quality stepparent-child relationships promote stepchild adjustment and are central to stable and satisfying stepfamilies (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002; Papernow, 2013). With respect to stepchild adjustment specifically, a nationally representative study found that greater stepfather-child closeness was linked to lower levels of externalizing problems, lower levels of internalizing problems, and higher levels of academic performance among adolescent stepchildren (King, 2006). Another study using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing study found that social father engagement was associated with declines in young children's behavior problems and better overall health (Bzostek, 2008).

Scholars have begun exploring the antecedents of high-quality stepparent-child relationships due to the positive adjustment dividends these relationships may extend to children. Predictors and correlates of stepfather-child relationship quality from the viewpoint of children have been synthesized, consolidated, and organized in a recent systematic review (see Jensen & Howard). Per this review, predictors of stepfather-child relationship quality

can be categorized into the following conceptual domains: individual characteristics, family characteristics, stepcouple dynamics, and (step)parent-child interaction.

Stepfather involvement, as a construct, coincides with the domain of (step)parent-child interaction. We define stepfather involvement broadly as interactive behaviors or shared activities between stepparents and children that take place on a regular basis and involve various facets of family life (e.g., doing chores together, playing sports, watching shows, engaging in every day talk). One recent qualitative study found that children reported higher-quality relationships with their stepfathers when stepfathers offered children practical support (e.g., help with homework or other tasks) and made efforts to be involved in shared family activities (Kinniburgh-White, Carwright, & Seymour, 2010). In addition, spending a suitable amount of time together, overt displays of affection, family cohesion, stepparent-child communication, and stepparent-child relationship-maintaining behaviors have all been linked to higher quality stepparent-child relationships (Ganong, Coleman, & Jamison, 2011; Golish, 2003; Mendoza, 2011, Schrodt, 2006; Schrodt, Soliz, & Braithwaite, 2008). Research has also shown that children report higher quality relationships with their stepparents when stepparents exhibit affinity-seeking competence, accepting attitudes toward the child, and relationship-building effort and behaviors (Brown, 2002; Ganong et al., 2011; Larsen, 2005). Stepfather involvement may provide stepparents ample opportunities to display these characteristics and for children to develop a sense of friendship, companionship, and attachment with their stepparent (Coleman et al., 2013).

The intersection of racial identity and stepfamily processes remains an understudied area (Sweeney, 2010). Emerging literature suggests that African American children in both biologically intact families and stepfamilies report similar levels of mental health, self-esteem, and conflict management skills—a similarity not found among White children (Adler-Baeder et al., 2010). Some have posited that African American children are more accustomed than White children to receiving discipline from adults who are not biological parents (e.g., grandparents, neighbors, extended kin; Papernow, 2013), and may thus adjust to stepfamily life more readily than their White counterparts. African American stepfathers are also more likely than White stepfathers to extend deference to biological mothers with respect to children's discipline (Stewart, 2007); stepfamily functioning tends to be optimized when stepparents appropriately avoid disciplinary roles, particularly early on in stepfamily development (Papernow, 2013). Latino stepfamilies may also display unique characteristics that influence stepfamily processes, as Latino families hail from many different countries with unique cultures and immigration narratives. Common cultural norms among Latino families include more collectivist views of family life; the concept of "familism" is commonly manifest among Latino families, and embodies interdependence, close family ties, mutual support, and cooperation that generally override individual and personal needs (Coltrane, Gutierrez, & Parke, 2008; Garcia-Petro, 2005).

Taken together, stepfamilies of varying racial identities exhibit great variability in family processes and demonstrate unique strengths. Unfortunately, minority families also have the potential for experiencing ongoing stress associated with various forms of discrimination or "mundane extreme environment stress" that accompany the typical stressors encountered by most families (Peters & Massey, 1983). We provide no specific or directional hypotheses

about how race may moderate the association between stepfather involvement on stepfather-child relationship quality given the paucity of research in this area. There are meaningful implications for practice regardless of whether race operates as a significant moderator.

In addition to the potential moderating influence of race, other family characteristics may also moderate associations between stepfamily processes and stepfamily relationship quality. Parental marital status, specifically, has been linked to stepfamily dynamics and outcomes, although findings are mixed. For example, Brown (2004) found that the well-being of children in their sample did not significantly differ between cohabiting and married stepfamilies. Conversely, children in married stepfamilies may receive greater material and economic advantage than their counterparts in cohabiting stepfamilies (Manning & Brown, 2006), and youth living in cohabiting stepfamilies may fare worse across a number of well-being indicators than youth living in married stepfamilies (Brown, 2006).

Perhaps the most obvious issue that cohabitation can generate in stepfamilies is an elevated level of family boundary ambiguity, which is defined as “not knowing who is in or who is out of one’s family” (Boss, 2002, p. 95). In the context of a family stress perspective, family boundary ambiguity represents a perceptual factor that may exacerbate the stress levels of a family experiencing a stressor event or situation, such as the formation of a stepfamily (Boss, 2002). When a parent and stepparent cohabit rather than marry, family members may experience greater ambiguity with respect to the addition of the stepparent due to the legal and social uncertainties that coincide with non-marital stepfamily status. Indeed, Brown and Manning (2009) found that members of cohabiting stepfamilies reported higher levels of family boundary ambiguity than members of married stepfamilies, and that higher levels of boundary ambiguity were linked to lower levels of family connectedness. Thus, parental marital status may moderate the influence of various family processes, such as stepfather involvement, on the acquisition of high quality stepfamily relationships.

With cohabitation in the United States on the rise (Cherlin, 2010), it has become increasingly pertinent for family scholars and practitioners to understand how various processes impact families differentially on the basis of parental marital status (or the legal and social factors associated with it). Family demographers have noted that cohabitation may be more likely among those with less education and fewer financial resources (Kennedy & Bumpass, 2008; Lichter, Qian, & Mellott, 2006). Thus, exploring the nexus of parental marital status and stepfamily processes may be particularly helpful in the context of socio-demographic diversity—a feature of the stepfamilies in our current sample.

In addition to previous empirical work, our focus on stepfather-child relationship quality warrants the application of relevant theory. Because stepfather-child relationship quality may stem from or serve as an indicator of a growing sense of attachment between stepfathers and children, we draw from attachment theory to further frame our study. Attachment theory emphasizes the primacy of human emotional bonds (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). Starting at birth, children innately strive for and benefit from connection with one or more caregivers. Secure attachment orientations are formed when children are provided with parental interactions marked by emotional responsiveness, availability, consistency, and engagement (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007). As stepparents engage with their pre-adolescent stepchildren

in various settings, more opportunities for establishing and sustaining a secure attachment, at best, or a meaningful source of practical support, at worst, are likely provided. Consequently, children may perceive elevated levels of stepfather-child relationship quality as a natural byproduct of stepfather involvement. Because secure attachments encompass trust, support, safety, and connection, a secure stepfather-child attachment, as facilitated by stepfather involvement, could lay the foundation for a high-quality stepfather-child relationship. Indeed, features of a secure stepfather-child attachment could make the relationship very rewarding and high-quality for children.

Any link between stepfather involvement and stepfather-child relationship quality is also undoubtedly influenced by the developmental stage of the child. Pre-adolescence is a developmental stage marked by significant cognitive growth, notable social transitions, and a continued reliance on family relationships to help regulate emotions and provide social structure (Charlesworth, 2015); whereas adolescents are increasingly less reliant on family relationships, more focused on peer relationships, and in pursuit of greater autonomy. Thus, pre-adolescence may be a particularly valuable site for research and practice aimed at bolstering stepfamily functioning and child adjustment.

### **Current Study**

Our current understanding of the factors that promote the development of high quality stepparent-child relationships is limited, yet growing (Ganong et al., 2011; Jensen & Howard, 2015). This gap in the literature is even larger in the context of socio-demographically diverse stepfamilies (Sweeney, 2010). Ongoing investigation in these areas is warranted, as nearly one-third of all children will live in a stepfamily at some point (Bumpass et al., 1995; Pew Research Center, 2011). Moreover, stepfather-child relationship quality has been linked to children's adjustment and stepfamily stability (King, 2006; van Eeden-Moorefield & Pasley, 2013). Building on previous empirical work, the purpose of the current study is to examine the association between stepfather involvement and stepfather-child relationship quality among a racially diverse and predominately low-income sample of stepfamilies with pre-adolescent children. We also examine the extent to which racial identity and parental marital status moderate this association. The children in our sample range from 8 to 11 years of age. This stage of childhood represents a formative period preceding the transition to middle school and adolescence—a transition that can exacerbate the stress of stepfamily formation (Ganong et al., 2011). Results from our study may inform stepfamily intervention development by identifying a malleable factor (Fraser & Galinsky, 2010), stepfather involvement, that can improve the quality of stepparent-child relationships.

## **Methods**

### **Data and Sample**

We used data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, a birth cohort study of nearly 5,000 children born in 20 large U.S. cities between 1998 and 2000 (Reichman, Teitler, Garfinkel, & McLanahan, 2001). Births were randomly sampled within hospitals with an oversample for non-marital births. At baseline, mothers and fathers had response rates of 86% and 79%, respectively. Since baseline, follow-up telephone interviews have

been completed by mothers and fathers when the focal child was approximately 1, 3, 5, and 9 years old. By year 9, 76% of mothers and 59% of fathers who were eligible remained in the study.

At the 9 year wave, focal children participated in a short in-home survey about their family relationships, school experiences, routines, behaviors, and health. These data are appropriate for our research purposes because of the inclusion of the child's perspective on stepfather-child relationship quality, the rich set of socio-demographic characteristics available, and the large number of stepfamilies within a representative sample. A subsample of 467 children who lived with a biological mother who was married to (45%) or cohabiting with (55%) a stepfather was used for our analyses. Due to missing data across study variables, 447 of the 467 participants were included in multivariate analyses. Differences between these 20 omitted cases and the remaining 447 cases were statistically negligible. Forty-eight percent of children were female with an average age of 9.27 years ( $SD = .38$  years). Forty-nine percent of children's mothers were non-Hispanic Black, 30% were Hispanic or other, and 21% were non-Hispanic White. Annual household income at year 9 ranged from \$0 to \$345,000, with an average income of \$43,883 ( $SD = \$35,850$ ). The median annual household income at year 9 was \$35,000; approximately 37% of the participants warranted poverty status (i.e., household income < 100% of poverty threshold with respect to household count). Mothers' relationship duration ranged from 0 years to 22 years (mean = 4.8 years,  $SD = 3.02$  years; see Table 1 for more details).

## Measures

**Dependent Variable**—*Stepfather-child relationship quality* was a composite scale measured from the child's perspective with five items ( $\alpha = .75$ ). Items measured the extent to which children perceived being close to, spending enough time with, and having good communication with their stepfather. Each item had four response options (0 = "never," 1 = "sometimes," 2 = "often," and 3 = "always") such that higher values indicated higher quality stepfather-child relationships (see Table 2 for item details).

**Independent Variables**—*Stepfather involvement* was a composite scale measured from the mother's perspective with 10 items ( $\alpha = .83$ ). Items measured the frequency of various domains of stepfather involvement (e.g., doing chores, watching shows, playing sports, everyday talk) during the past month. Each item had five response options (1 = "not once," 2 = "one to two times," 3 = "once a week," 4 = "several times a week," and 5 = "every day") such that higher values indicated more frequent engagement in a particular interaction or activity during the past month (see Table 2 for item details).

**Moderators**—*Mother's racial identity* was measured with dummy variables representing non-Hispanic White (reference group), non-Hispanic Black, and Hispanic or other. *Parent's marital status* was measured with a binary variable such that a value of 1 indicated "married" and a value of 0 indicated "cohabiting."

**Covariates**—To more precisely estimate the net association between stepfather involvement and stepfather-child relationship quality, we incorporated several covariates that

may be linked to stepfather-child relationship quality. Specifically, we included measures for mother's baseline education, child's age, mother's baseline age, child's biological sex, mother's relationship with the biological father, the number of children in the household, family poverty status, and mother's relationship duration (Ganong et al., 2011; Jensen & Shafer, 2013; King, 2006; Papernow, 2013).

The age of mothers and children were measured with continuous variables in year units. Child's biological sex was a binary measure that represented either male (valued at 0) or female (valued at 1). Family poverty status at year 9 was measured as a binary variable such that a value of 1 indicated that the family was below the 100% poverty threshold and a value of 0 indicated that the family was at or above the 100% poverty threshold. Our inclusion of poverty status as a covariate helped us disentangle the influence of race from the influence of socio-economic status. Mother's baseline education was also measured with dummy variables representing less than high school, high school completion (reference group), and some/completed college. In terms of the mother's relationship with the biological father, each mother was asked to indicate a response that best described her relationship with the biological father. Response options were (a) separated, divorced, or widowed; (b) friends; (c) no relationship; and (d) father unknown. We created three dummy variables representing separated/divorced/widowed, friends, and no relationship/father unknown (reference group). We combined the father "unknown group" with the "no relationship" group because there were so few participants who reported the father as being unknown ( $n = 7$ ). Mother's relationship duration was a continuous measure in years and represented the length of time the mother had been romantically involved with the stepfather.

## Data Analysis

We began with a descriptive analysis of all study variables. Prior to creating composite scales, we conducted a series of confirmatory factor analytic models and measurement invariance tests to confirm the factor structure of stepfather-child relationship quality and stepfather involvement and to assess measurement invariance between racial groups and between cohabiting and married stepfamilies (results not shown). Configural (model structure), metric (factor loadings), and scalar (item thresholds) invariance between racial groups and between cohabiting and married stepfamilies was confirmed. All standardized factor loadings for stepfather-child relationship quality and stepfather involvement were significant and acceptable (ranging from .44 to .81). Preliminary calculations indicated that the measurement models were over-identified and adequately powered (Bowen & Guo, 2012; MacCallum, Browne, & Sugawara, 1996). Additional details pertaining to these measurement analyses are available upon request.

We then used ordinary least squares regression to examine the association between stepfather involvement and stepfather-child relationship quality, racial identity as a moderator, and parental marital status as a moderator. We first analyzed a main effects model with all substantive variables, moderators, and covariates included (Model 1). We then analyzed an interaction model in which an interaction term for stepfather involvement and race was included (Model 2). The final model (Model 3) omitted the first interaction term and introduced an interaction term for stepfather involvement and parental marital

status. We conducted supplemental diagnostic analyses to examine the presence of heteroskedasticity and multicollinearity. Results indicated no such issues. Univariate and multivariate analyses were conducted in Stata 13.0 (StataCorp, 2013). Preliminary measurement analyses were conducted in Mplus 7.11 (Muthén & Muthén, 2012), as Mplus is particularly well suited for the conduct of confirmatory factor analysis and measurement invariance testing (Geiser, 2013).

## Results

### Main Effects

Model 1 in Table 3 displays the results of our main effects model in which stepfather-child relationship quality is regressed on stepfather involvement (we note that the term “effects” is used solely to match the vernacular associated with moderation analysis, not to infer causality). Holding all covariates constant, a one-unit increase in stepfather involvement was associated with a .36 unit increase in stepfather-child relationship quality ( $\beta = .38, p < .001$ ). Mother’s marital status was also significantly associated with stepfather-child relationship quality. Specifically, children in married stepfamilies reported .20 units more stepfather-child relationship quality compared to children in cohabiting stepfamilies ( $p < .01$ ). No other covariates were significant. The adjusted R-squared of Model 1 was .16, indicating that the model explained approximately 16% of the variance in stepfather-child relationship quality.

### Moderation Effects

Model 2 in Table 3 displays the results of the analysis after including an interaction term for stepfather involvement and race. In the context of this model, stepfather involvement remained significantly and positively associated with stepfather-child relationship quality ( $b = .35, p < .001, \beta = .37$ ). The coefficient for and significance of mother’s marital status remained unchanged. The interaction term, however, was not statistically significant. Thus, racial identity did not significantly influence the association between stepfather involvement and stepfather-child relationship quality. No covariates were significant in Model 2. Similar to Model 1, Model 2 had an adjusted R-squared of .16.

Model 3 in Table 3 displays the results of the analysis after omitting the interaction term for stepfather involvement and race and including an interaction term for stepfather involvement and parental marital status. In this model, the coefficient for stepfather involvement increased to .47, meaning that a one-unit increase in stepfather involvement was associated with a .47 unit increase in stepfather-child relationship quality ( $\beta = .50, p < .001$ ). The coefficient for parental marital status increased to .93 ( $p < .01$ ), and the interaction term for stepfather involvement and parental marital status was significant ( $b = -.22, p < .01$ ). No covariates were significant in Model 3, and the adjusted R-squared rose to .17.

Taken together, the results from Model 3 indicated that parental marital status significantly moderated the association between stepfather involvement and stepfather-child relationship quality. Specifically, at the lowest end of stepfather involvement, children in married stepfamilies reported higher levels of stepfather-child relationship quality than children in cohabiting stepfamilies; however, rising levels of stepfather involvement increased levels of



stepfather-child relationship quality at a higher rate among children in cohabiting stepfamilies compared to children in married stepfamilies. Thus, at the highest end of stepfather involvement, children in cohabiting stepfamilies reported similar levels of stepfather-child relationship quality as children in married stepfamilies. Figure 1 illustrates this interaction effect.

## Discussion

We set out to examine the association between stepfather involvement and stepfather-child relationship quality among a racially diverse and predominately low-income sample of stepfather families with pre-adolescent children. Our results further support the importance of stepparent-child interaction (Jensen & Howard, 2015), as stepfather involvement is associated with higher quality stepfather-child relationships in our sample. Consistent with tenets of attachment theory, stepfather involvement likely provides opportunities for stepparents to engage with their stepchildren in ways that display emotional responsiveness, consistency, engagement, and availability (as evident in secure relationships). As a result, pre-adolescent children appear more likely to report higher quality stepfather-child relationships when stepfather-child interactions and shared activities are more frequent and established. This finding could reflect a process of attachment formation between stepfathers and children. We note that our models explained 16% to 17% of the variance in stepfather-child relationship quality. This signals to us that there are other factors not captured in our model that are exerting notable influence.

We also set out to examine the extent to which race and parental marital status moderate the association between stepfather involvement and stepfather-child relationship quality. With regard to the former, we found that racial identity does not significantly moderate this association. Thus, the association between stepfather involvement and stepfather-child relationship quality is indistinguishable across racial groups in our sample. Although families of different racial identities and backgrounds can exhibit notable variation in family processes and experiences, it appears that the role of stepfather involvement in the development of stepfather-child relationships among pre-adolescent children in our sample transcends racial boundaries. Therefore, the process and consequences of attachment formation between a stepfather and child may be universal among this population. Indeed, as stepfather's increase their involvement in a child's life, attachment theory would suggest that attachment would increase regardless of race. Unfortunately, most studies in which predictors of stepfather-child relationship quality are examined use relatively homogenous samples with mostly White, middle-class participants (Jensen & Howard, 2015). Our study represents an important point of departure from this trend by looking at a diverse sample of stepfamilies.

We also found that parental marital status significantly moderates the association between stepfather involvement and stepfather-child relationship quality. Compared to children residing in married stepfamilies, children residing in cohabiting stepfamilies appear to yield greater gains in stepfather-child relationship quality as stepfather involvement increases. As noted earlier, cohabiting stepfamilies are generally marked by elevated levels of family boundary ambiguity (Brown & Manning, 2009). Thus, children in cohabiting stepfamilies

may particularly benefit from the establishment of stepfather involvement in various domains of family life. Indeed, frequent and predictable interactions between stepparents and children may diminish children's perceptions of family boundary ambiguity with respect to the stepparent and create a more socially concrete context in which the stepfather-child relationship can be explored and strengthened and attachment between the stepfather and child can be fostered.

We note that our findings should be interpreted with a developmental lens. Our sample includes children in pre-adolescence, a distinct developmental stage marked by notable cognitive and social advancements (Charlesworth, 2015). Children at this stage of development may be well equipped to leverage interactions with a stepfather in ways that bolster stepfather-child attachment and relationship quality. In the context of developmental theory (Sameroff, 2010), younger children may benefit even more from stepfather involvement as they tend to rely more on their social ecologies to regulate emotions and experiences, whereas adolescent children may rely less on stepfather involvement as they shift their focus away from family relationships, focus more on peer relationships, and seek for greater autonomy (Sameroff, 2010). Because our findings may not generalize to children in other age groups, future research should explore the link between stepfather involvement and stepfather-child attachment and relationship quality within other stages of child development.

### Practice Implications

As noted earlier, parenting practices and parent-child relationships have been linked to the well-being of children in stepfamilies. These links are sustained in both survey and intervention research (e.g., Forgatch, DeGarmo, & Beldavs, 2005). The establishment of stepfather involvement represents a malleable stepparenting practice that can be targeted by intervention (Fraser & Galinsky, 2010). Thus, our findings have implications for marriage and family therapists, family life educators, and other practitioners or clinicians who work with racially diverse and predominately low-income stepfather families, particularly those with children between the ages of 9 and 11 (a formative period prior to the transition to middle school and adolescence).

First, stepfathers should be encouraged to engage with their stepchildren in various interactions and shared activities including chores, outdoor activities, indoor activities, play, reading, school work, and everyday talk. Stepparents often experience significant ambiguity with respect to the role they should take in stepfamily contexts (Papernow, 2013). Perhaps due to instincts or desperation, many stepfathers attempt to take on a disciplinary role with their stepchildren (Papernow, 2013), rather than providing practical and emotional support to their stepchildren. Practitioners and educators should help stepfathers avoid adopting roles that may obstruct the development of stepfamily relationships and guide them in identifying meaningful ways they can involve themselves in the lives of their stepchildren and foster a secure attachment. Indeed, stepfathers' efforts to catalyze the development of strong relationships and attachments with their stepchildren will likely be optimized when they focus on relationship-building and relationship-maintaining behaviors, characteristics of stepfather involvement as outlined in our study.

Stepfathers may benefit from the support of their partners as they strive to involve themselves in the lives of their stepchildren and develop a secure stepfather-child attachment. Parents often feel pressure to “blend” all stepfamily relationships together (Papernow, 2013). In other words, parents often feel pressure to ensure that stepfamily relationships resemble relationships in first-time, biologically intact families with respect to the amount of love, cohesion, and connection experienced between all stepfamily members. Therapists, educators, and other practitioners can reassure parents that the compartmentalization of dyadic relationships in stepfamilies can be productive and effective, meaning that stepfathers and children should be provided space to naturally build their relationship together outside the context of other family relationships (Papernow, 2013). Parents can also encourage the stepfather and child to become involved with one another by participating in activities that are of mutual interest or meaningful to both parties, rather than activities that may lead the child or stepfather to feel left out (Papernow, 2013).

Second, therapists, family life educators, and other practitioners may find that children of varying racial identities accrue similar gains in stepfather-child relationship quality from stepfather involvement. Still, all helping professionals should maintain cultural competence when helping stepfather families from different racial backgrounds and heritages build secure and meaningful stepfather-child attachments. There are rich resources available to practitioners and educators that highlight nuances associated with the clinical and educational engagement of families from diverse backgrounds, including African American families (e.g., Boyd-Franklin, 2013) and Latino families (e.g., Falicov, 2013; Reck, Higginbotham, Skogran, & Davis, 2012; Skogrand, Barrios-Bell, & Higginbotham, 2009).

Third, cohabiting stepfather families may be a particularly fruitful target of stepfamily interventions that focus on promoting stepfather involvement and fostering secure stepfather-child attachments. Based on our results, we might expect the quality of stepfather-child relationships in cohabiting stepfamilies to match the quality of stepfather-child relationships of married stepfamilies when stepfathers and children engage with one another several times a week or daily, on average. This may be a helpful threshold to consider as practitioners and educators work with members of cohabiting stepfather families. Again, our suggestions for practitioners and educators pertain specifically to racially diverse and predominately low-income stepfather families in which the focal child is in his or her pre-adolescent years.

### Limitations and Future Directions

The results of our study should be interpreted in the context of analytical limitations. Because our analysis was cross-sectional, we cannot be certain about the temporal order of the constructs in our model. Thus, our ability to draw causal inferences is hindered. Although our data came from a multi-wave study, use of an earlier wave (children at age 5) would have omitted half of our analytical sample due to the small number of children who had the same stepparent between waves. Further, a four-year gap between waves might obscure the meaning of links between earlier stepfather involvement and subsequent stepfather-child relationship quality. Notwithstanding, future research should examine the influence of stepfather involvement on stepfather-child relationship quality over time using the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing data or other longitudinal datasets. Because

stepfather involvement and stepfather-child relationship quality likely exhibit a bidirectional and reciprocal association, longitudinal data from multiple time points would allow for the analysis of informative autoregressive cross-lagged models.

In terms of measurement, our analyses were only able to incorporate the perceptions of mothers and children, not resident stepfathers; however, our use of mothers' reports of stepfather involvement and children's reports of stepfather-child relationship quality helped us reduce mono-method bias (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002). Stepfathers' reports of involvement were not available in our data. Although stepfathers' reports of their own involvement with stepchildren may be influenced by social desirability bias, stepfathers' reports are also capable of increasing accuracy as mothers are not always present when stepfather-child interaction occurs. In any case, future research in this area would benefit from the incorporation of multiple family-member perspectives as they relate to stepfamily processes and relationship quality. Also, because our study did not incorporate an explicit measure of stepfather-child attachment, future research should include such a measure and assess the extent to which stepfather involvement exerts influence on stepfather-child relationship quality via reports of stepfather-child attachment.

Our analysis should also be re-examined in the context of father-stepmother families using data that provides an adequate number of these families. Other directions for future research include an explicit examination of attachment-related constructs that might mediate the association between routines and relationship quality. Although our measure of stepfather-relationship quality matches those used in other published studies, future work would benefit from the inclusion of stepfather-child relationship quality measures that have been subjected to more rigorous validation analyses, such as the Stepparent Relationship Index (Schrodt, 2006). With respect to the practice implications listed earlier, we note that our findings were generated among a non-clinical population of stepfamilies. To further bolster generalizability to populations with whom practitioners are likely to work, future research should examine associations between stepfather involvement and stepfather-child relationship quality among clinical samples of stepfamilies.

## Conclusion

Stepfamilies are an increasingly common family context in which children develop. The quality of the stepparent-child relationship is linked to children's adjustment, as well as the stability of the stepfamily system. There is a growing body of research in which predictors of stepparent-child relationship quality from the viewpoint of children are being explored (Jensen & Howard, 2015). Our study contributes to this literature by highlighting stepfather involvement as being strongly associated with high quality stepfather-child relationships among racially diverse and predominately low-income stepfamilies with pre-adolescent children. Our study extends this contribution by finding that the positive association between stepfather involvement and stepfather-child relationship quality is even more pronounced among members of cohabiting stepfamilies than members of married stepfamilies.

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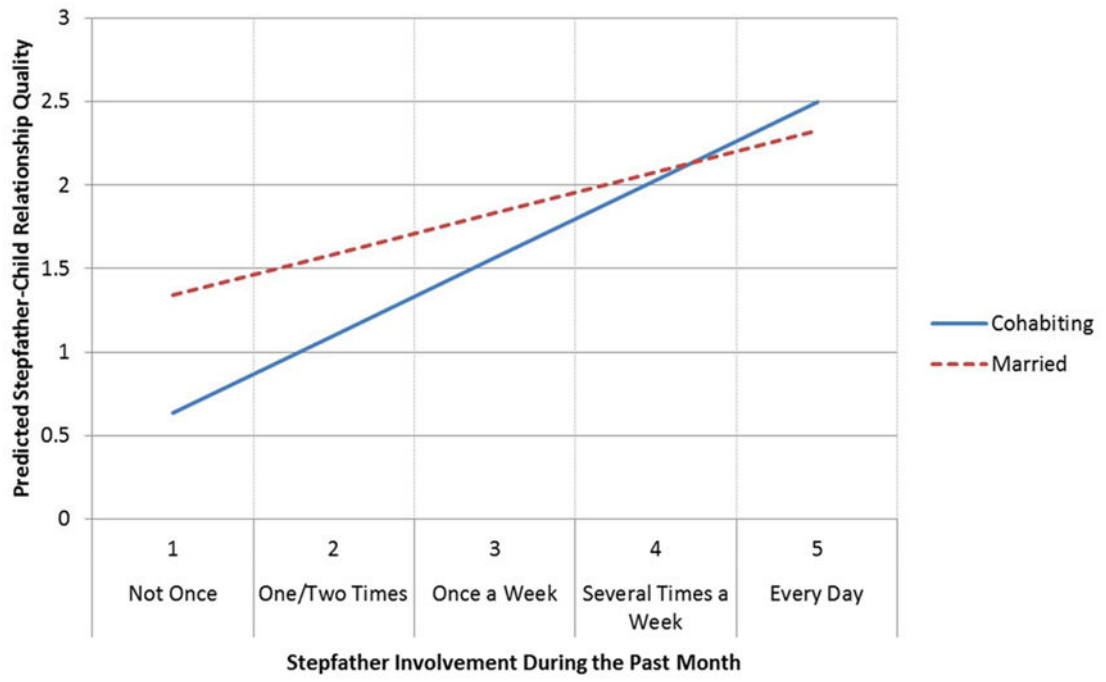
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**Figure 1. Interaction Effect of Stepfather Involvement and Parental Marital Status on Predicted Stepfather-Child Relationship Quality**

*Note:* All covariates are set to sample mean levels.



**Table 1**

Sample Description and Study Variables (N = 467)

Variable	N	Mean or Proportion	SD	Min	Max	% Missing
<b>Dependent Variable (<math>\alpha = .75</math>)</b>						
Stepfather-Child Relationship Quality	464	1.83	0.78	0	3	0.64%
<b>Independent Variable (<math>\alpha = .83</math>)</b>						
Stepfather Involvement	467	3.26	0.83	1	5	0.00%
<b>Moderators</b>						
Mother's racial identity						
Non-hispanic White	467	0.21	0	0	1	0.00%
Non-hispanic Black	467	0.49	0	0	1	0.00%
Hispanic, Other	467	0.30	0	0	1	0.00%
Parent's marital status (1 = married)	467	0.45	0	0	1	0.00%
<b>Covariates</b>						
Child's biological sex (1 = female)	467	0.49	0	0	1	0.00%
Mother's baseline education						
Less than high school	467	0.36	0	0	1	0.00%
High school completion	467	0.35	0	0	1	0.00%
Some or completed college	467	0.29	0	0	1	0.00%
Child's age (in years)	466	9.28	0.38	8.75	11.17	0.21%
Mother's baseline age (in years)	466	22.60	4.54	15	41	0.21%
Mother's relationship with bio-father						
Separated, divorced, or widowed	456	0.20	0	0	1	2.36%
Friends	456	0.24	0	0	1	2.36%
No relationship, or father unknown	456	0.56	0	0	1	2.36%
Number of children in household	465	2.87	1.27	1	8	0.43%
Poverty status (1 = < 100% poverty threshold)	467	0.37	0	0	1	0.00%
Mother's relationship duration (in years)	465	4.80	3.02	0	22	0.43%

Note: Sample includes only children living with a mother and cohabiting/married stepfather at year 9 of data collection. Estimates are unweighted.

**Table 2**

Scale Items	Likert-scale response option range
<b>Stepfather-Child Relationship Quality (child reports)</b>	
11 Social dad talks over important decisions with you	0 = never 3 = always
12 Social dad listens to your side of an argument	0 = never 3 = always
13 Social dad spends enough time with you	0 = never 3 = always
14 How close you feel to social dad	0 = not very close 3 = extremely close
15 How well you and social dad share ideas or talk about things that matter	0 = not very well 3 = extremely well
<b>Stepfather Involvement (mother reports)</b>	
1 Frequency partner did household chores with child in past month	1 = not once 5 = every day
2 Frequency partner played sports or outdoor activities with child in past month	1 = not once 5 = every day
3 Frequency partner watched TV or videos with child in past month	1 = not once 5 = every day
4 Frequency partner played video or computer games with child in past month	1 = not once 5 = every day
5 Frequency partner read books or talked about books with child in past month	1 = not once 5 = every day
6 Frequency partner participated in indoor activities with child in past month	1 = not once 5 = every day
7 Frequency partner talked about current events with child in past month	1 = not once 5 = every day
8 Frequency partner talked about day with child in past month	1 = not once 5 = every day
9 Frequency partner made sure child's homework was complete in past month	1 = not once 5 = every day
10 Frequency partner helped child with homework in past month	1 = not once 5 = every day

OLS Regression With Stepfather-Child Relationship Quality Regressed on Stepfather Involvement and Interaction Terms

Table 3

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	Coef.	SE	Coef.	SE	Coef.	SE
Stepfather Involvement	0.36	0.04***	0.35	0.10***	0.47	0.06***
Non-hispanic Black	0.14	0.09	0.10	0.38	0.13	0.09
Hispanic/other	0.13	0.10	0.05	0.40	0.13	0.10
Non-hispanic White	(ref)					
Parent's marital status (1 = married)	0.20	0.07**	0.20	0.07**	0.93	0.28**
Child's biological sex (1 = female)	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.07	0.06	0.07
Less than high school	-0.06	0.08	-0.06	0.08	-0.06	0.08
Some or completed college	0.05	0.09	0.05	0.09	0.06	0.09
High school completion	(ref)					
Child's age	0.02	0.09	0.02	0.09	0.00	0.09
Mother's age	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.00	0.01
Separated, divorced, or widowed	-0.06	0.09	-0.06	0.09	-0.06	0.09
Friends	0.00	0.09	0.00	0.09	0.00	0.08
No relationship, or father unknown	(ref)					
Number of children in household	0.02	0.03	0.02	0.03	0.03	0.03
Poverty status (1 = < 100% poverty threshold)	0.07	0.08	0.06	0.08	0.06	0.08
Mother's relationship duration	-0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.01	-0.01	0.01
Stepparent-child routines X Non-hispanic Black			0.01	0.11		
Stepparent-child routines X Hispanic/other			0.02	0.12		
Stepparent-child routines X parent's marital status					-0.22	0.08**
Constant	0.24	0.87	0.29	0.93	0.05	0.87
R-squared		0.18		0.18		0.20
Adjusted R-squared		0.16		0.16		0.17
N		447		447		447

Note:

\*\*\*  
p < .001.

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.1.  
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\*  $p < .05$ . (ref) means reference group. All coefficients are unstandardized. Supplemental analyses indicated no issues with heteroskedasticity or multicollinearity.