


Stepparents' Attachment Orientation, Parental Gatekeeping, and Stepparents' Affinity-Seeking with Stepchildren

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Remarried stepfamilies are a sizable portion of American families; in a 2011 Pew Center survey, 42% of respondents reported at least one stepfamily member. Family clinicians and researchers suggest that stepparents' ability to develop close bonds with stepchildren may be critical to the well-being of couple and family relationships. Using actor-partner interdependence models to analyze dyadic data from 291 heterosexual remarried stepfamily couples, we explored factors related to stepparents' efforts to befriend their stepchildren. Specifically, we evaluated how remarried parents' gatekeeping and stepparents' perceptions of their attachment orientations were associated with their own and their spouse's perceptions of stepparents' affinity-seeking behaviors. Securely attached stepparents and stepparents with anxious attachment orientations engaged more frequently in affinity behaviors than did stepparents with avoidant attachment orientations; there was no difference between securely attached and anxious stepparents. Stepparents' reports of parents' restrictive gatekeeping were strongly and negatively associated with both stepparents' and parents' reports of stepparent affinity-seeking (actor and partner effects). Parents' reports of their own restrictive gatekeeping were also negatively (but more weakly) associated with parents' reports of stepparent affinity-seeking. Implications for families, clinicians, and relationship researchers and theorists are discussed.

Keywords: Stepparents; Gatekeeping; Attachment; Stepchildren; Affinity-Seeking

The quality of stepparent–stepchild relationships is important to stepfamilies because when stepparent–stepchild relationships are friendly, parents, stepparents, and children benefit in many ways (i.e., emotionally, physically; Jensen & Harris, 2017a,b; Jensen, Lippold, Mills-Koonce, & Fosco, 2018; King, 2006). When stepparents and stepchildren do not get along, the whole family can suffer (Browning & Artelt, 2012; Crosbie-Burnett, 1984; Jensen & Howard, 2015; Jensen & Shafer, 2013). Because of the importance of step-relationships on family well-being, clinicians generally advise stepparents to focus early in the relationship on developing a positive emotional connection (i.e.,

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establishing a friendship) before attempting to discipline stepchildren (Papernow, 2013). There is emerging consensus that stepparents' *affinity-seeking behaviors*, defined as active processes intentionally performed to get stepchildren to like them and to feel positive toward them (Daly & Kreiser, 1994), are effective early in relationships (Ganong, Jensen, Sanner, Russell, & Coleman, in press); Browning & Artelt, 2012; Ganong, Coleman, Fine, & Martin, 1999; Ganong, Coleman, & Jamison, 2011; Papernow, 2013).

Developing emotionally close and satisfying relationships with stepchildren is easier for some stepparents than for others, and some make no efforts to do this at all (Ganong et al., 1999, 2011; Kinniburgh-White, Cartwright, & Seymour, 2010). For stepparents who find affinity-building with stepchildren difficult, there is clinical support and stepfamily education available to help them overcome stepchildren's resistance or their own reluctance to engage (Adler-Baeder, 2007; Browning & Artelt, 2012; Nicholson, Phillips, Whitton, Halford, & Sanders, 2007).

What prevents some stepparents from developing friendships with their stepchildren? Family systems theories propose that the interpersonal behaviors of members of a subsystem (e.g., stepparent affinity-seeking with stepchildren) may be influenced by the interactions of other members of the subsystem (e.g., stepchildren's negative responses to stepparents' affinity-seeking actions), by the actions of family members not in the stepparent-stepchild subsystem (e.g., parents' gatekeeping behaviors), and by intrapersonal characteristics of family members (e.g., stepparents' attachment orientations; Whitchurch & Constantine, 1993). Guided by family systems theories, we explored two factors that may impede stepparents' engaging in affinity-seeking actions with stepchildren: (a) stepparents' attachment orientations and (b) biological parents' restrictive gatekeeping efforts. There are many factors that potentially affect stepparents' efforts to befriend their stepchildren; we have chosen to examine two disparate constructs that are linked by the systems principles mentioned (i.e., attachment orientation as intrapersonal influence and parental gatekeeping as interpersonal influences). It is possible that stepparents' attachment orientations and biological parents' restrictive gatekeeping behaviors are systemically interconnected in unexplored ways. For example, it may be that parents' gatekeeping is done partially in response to stepparents' perceived attachment orientations, or it may be that certain stepparent attachment orientations are more compatible with lower or higher levels of parental gatekeeping. By combining these constructs in a single report, we can examine the relative impacts of stepparents' attachment orientation and parental gatekeeping on stepparents' affinity-seeking behaviors.

Stepparents' Attachment Orientations and Affinity-Seeking with Stepchildren

Adult attachment theory, which is compatible with family systems theories (Crespo, 2012; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012), is grounded in earlier research on children's attachment to their primary caregivers (Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Walls, 1978; Bowlby, 1982). According to attachment theory, mental representations of the world and other people, including the self, also known as internal working models, are largely shaped by a caregiver's emotional availability and responsiveness to children's needs (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1982). Caregivers who are sensitive, supportive, and responsive to needs promote a positive mental representation of self (e.g., "I am worthy of love") and others (e.g., "I trust that others can provide the love I need"), also known as secure attachment orientation. In contrast, unreliable caregiving promotes internal working models that result in attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance, in turn resulting in negative mental representations of self (e.g., "I don't deserve to feel loved") and/or others ("I don't trust that others will support me when I need them"; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). These internal working models that began in infancy often

continue throughout an individual's life course; adults form attachments with a variety of close relationship partners (e.g., spouses, friends, coaches; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012; Simpson, Collins, & Salvatore, 2011). Internal working models lead to generalized attachment orientations, or relatively stable ways of perceiving and interacting with others (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012). Individuals who have secure attachment orientations tend to form relationships that facilitate individual well-being and the development of skills needed to build and maintain close and satisfying bonds (e.g., emotion regulation, conflict resolution; Crespo, 2012). In contrast, adults with anxious or avoidant attachment orientations often experience less satisfying relationships because they are either anxious about getting their own needs met or they suppress their emotions and attempt to avoid bonding (Simpson et al., 2011). It should be noted that attachment orientations are not necessarily fixed or permanent—adults with inadequate caregiving experiences as infants and children can change attachment orientations in a variety of ways, such as via therapy or situational events (e.g., having a partner with a different attachment orientation; Simpson et al., 2011).

Studies of adult attachment orientations generally have focused on the association of secure, anxious, and avoidant attachment orientations and a variety of relational outcomes in multiple close relationships, including connections between parents and children (e.g., Cohn, Cowan, Cowan, & Pearson, 1992; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012) and parenting quality (Shlafer, Raby, Lawler, Hesemeyer, & Roisman, 2015). Secure parents experience more joy and pleasure in their relationships with children than insecure parents (Rholes, Simpson, & Friedman, 2006; Scher & Dror, 2003), provide more sensitive parenting (Cohn et al., 1992; Doyle, Markiewicz, Brendgen, Lieberman, & Voss, 2000), and feel more competent as parents in managing children's distress (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012). Parents' avoidance has been associated with feeling less close to children (Rholes, Simpson, & Blakely, 1995).

Stepparents' attachment orientations may affect their willingness to engage with their stepchildren and their competence to form positive, satisfying relationships with them. Stepparents with secure attachment orientations may be more willing to risk rejection by stepchildren, allowing stepparents to more confidently and persistently interact with them. Securely attached stepparents may be motivated to bond and seek opportunities to engage with stepchildren. Conversely, stepparents with avoidant attachment orientations generally may perceive the stepparent role as more challenging and overwhelming than do their secure counterparts (Jensen, Lombardi, & Larson, 2015). This could be due, in part, because stepparents with avoidant attachment orientations are more hesitant to initiate interpersonal interactions, less skilled at friendship-building strategies, or simply less interested in developing ties with stepchildren. Stepparents with anxious attachment orientations may also differ from securely attached stepparents; they may be less sure of their ability to build new relationships, for example, and they may feel more afraid of the stepchild's rejection or lack of reciprocity. In short, stepparents with avoidant attachment orientations may be less likely to seek affinity than others and those with both avoidant and anxious attachment orientations may be less adept at developing affinity if they tried to do so. These speculations have not yet been examined.

Parents' Restrictive Gatekeeping and Stepparents' Affinity-Seeking with Stepchildren

The second factor we examined in this study was restrictive gatekeeping of stepparents by biological parents. Gatekeeping has been defined as "functions exercised by one or both parents that determine who will have access to their children and the nature of that access" (Pruett, Williams, Insabella, & Little, 2003, p. 171). Initially seen as behaviors and

strategies to inhibit coparents from interacting with shared children, researchers have broadened the concept of gatekeeping to include facilitative and protective actions as well as restrictive behaviors (Austin, Pruett, Kirkpatrick, Flens, & Gould, 2013; Pruett et al., 2003; Sano, Richards, & Zvonkovic, 2008). Although gatekeeping may be nondirectional—*gate closing* describes actions that restrict parents' engagement with children and *gate opening* describes behaviors that enhance coparents' involvement—of primary interest in this study is restrictive gatekeeping. Restrictive gatekeeping is when one parent prevents a coparent from interacting with a child or limits the time and ways in which interactions occur (Ganong, Coleman, & Chapman, 2016). Usually the person being gatekept is the other biological parent, but sometimes grandparents, in-laws, extended kin, and stepparents are gatekept as well.

Both mothers and fathers engage in gatekeeping. However, given that mothers are more likely to have physical custody of children after divorce than are fathers, much of the research on gatekeeping has centered on divorced mothers controlling fathers' contacts with children (Ganong et al., 2016). For both mothers and fathers, the nature of gatekeeping often changes after remarriage or repartnering (Ganong, Coleman, Jamison, & Feistman, 2015; Ganong et al., 2016; Moore, 2012). For example, remarried parents who want to recreate a nuclear family household may increase their efforts to restrict nonresidential parents' involvement with children because new stepparents assuming parental functions simplifies their lives and allows the stepfamily to operate as if it was a first-marriage nuclear family, our cultural "ideal" (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Most researchers have found that nonresidential parents reduce their involvement with children when either parent remarries (Manning & Smock, 1999; Manning, Stewart, & Smock, 2003).

Biological parents in stepfamilies often engage in restrictive gatekeeping with stepparents as well as with former partners/coparents (Stevenson et al., 2014; Sweeney, Goldberg, & Garcia, 2017). There is evidence from qualitative research that mothers in stepfamilies regulate interactions between partners (the stepfathers) and their children from prior unions (Ganong et al., 2015; Weaver & Coleman, 2010). These studies noted that gatekeeping involved facilitative actions to promote stepparent-stepchild bonding, protective actions meant to ensure children were safe, and restrictive actions aimed at controlling stepfathers' levels of involvement with their stepchildren (particularly regarding discipline). There is no evidence regarding how parental gatekeeping relates to stepparents' affinity-seeking, but we speculate that parental behaviors focused on limiting stepparents' interactions and involvement may limit stepparents' affinity-seeking behaviors. For example, stepparents' efforts to engage in bonding activities may be restricted if parents disapprove of the activity (e.g., stepfather is playing too rough, stepmother is encouraging the children to call her mom). Parents who raised children for a long time in single-parent households may set boundaries for stepparents because they prefer to be the sole parent in charge (Ganong et al., 2015; Weaver & Coleman, 2010), and some gatekeeping limiting stepparents' involvement in childrearing may be protective, as parents may not trust a new partner to competently rear their children (Ganong et al., 2016). It is likely that repeated rebuffs by the parent may result in reduced efforts by stepparents to seek affinity with stepchildren in order to avoid conflicts with their remarried partner/biological parent.

Current Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the associations among stepparents' attachment orientation, biological parents' gatekeeping between their children and the stepparents, and stepparents' affinity-seeking behaviors aimed at developing close emotional relationships with stepchildren. We also contribute to this literature by using dyadic data

obtained from both parents and stepparents, which allows us to incorporate perceptions of both stepfamily adults. The following hypotheses were tested:

- (1) Stepparents with secure attachment orientations engage more frequently in affinity strategies than stepparents with avoidant or anxious attachment orientations.
- (2) When biological parents engage in more restrictive gatekeeping behaviors, stepparents engage in fewer affinity efforts.

METHODS

Data and Sample

Participants for the current study were obtained via Qualtrics, a web-based platform that recruits large numbers of individuals to participate in online studies. Respondents choose to join a panel through a double opt-in process. Upon registration, they enter basic demographic information. When a new survey is created for which the individual would qualify based on the information they have given, they are notified via email and invited to participate in the survey. Email invitations are simple and generic, with no specifics as to the topic of the survey; they are given a link and told to follow the link if they would like to participate for a small incentive. The following inclusion criteria for recruitment were specified: individuals who (a) were remarried in heterosexual relationships, (b) lived more than half of the time with at least one child who was younger than 18 years of age from either partner's previous unions, (c) were able to read and understand English, and (d) had a spouse willing to participate. Eligible respondents and their partners were asked to independently complete an online survey with questions related to their perceptions of stepfamily dynamics and relationships. Participants were verified and agreed to take part in the survey for an incentive equal to \$11 per person that included a variety of rewards (e.g., cash, airline miles, gift cards). Individuals agreed at the beginning of the survey that they would only receive compensation after both spouses completed the survey and responses were verified. Participants were instructed to take the survey separately from their spouse and not to discuss their responses until after both had completed the survey. Questions related to parent-child or stepparent-child relationships or interactions were centered on the same focal child (i.e., the oldest child residing in the household more than half of the time who was one partner's child and the other partner's stepchild).

The analytical sample included 291 couples, each comprised of a biological parent and stepparent. Nearly 82% of the stepparents were stepfathers. About half of the focal children identified as female and were 11.98 years ($SD = 3.91$ years) old on average. The average number of children in households was 3.21 ($SD = 1.42$), and the average duration of stepcouple relationships was 7.92 years ($SD = 4.15$). With respect to household income, respondents reported annual household income levels ranging from less than \$10,000 to \$100,000 or more. Modal levels of annual household income were \$30,000–39,999 (14.1%), \$20,000–29,999 (13.4%), and \$100,000 or more (13.4%), followed by \$50,000–59,999 (12.4%).

Over 81% of *biological parents* identified as White, 9% identified as Hispanic/Latinx, 6% identified as Black or African American, and 3% identified as multiracial; the remaining 1% identified as Asian, American Indian/Alaskan Native, or Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Island. Over 76% of *stepparents* identified as White, 11% identified as Hispanic/Latinx, 8% identified as Black or African American, nearly 2% identified as American Indian or Alaskan Native, and nearly 2% identified as multiracial; the remaining 1% identified as Asian or Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Island.

Measures

Parent restrictive gatekeeping

Parent restrictive gatekeeping was measured using 20 items from the van Egeren Parental Regulation Inventory, which asked respondents to indicate how often the biological parent engaged in various restrictive gatekeeping behaviors between the stepparent and focal child (Schoppe-Sullivan, Altenburger, Lee, Bower, & Kamp Dush, 2015). Ordinal response options ranged from 1 (“never”) to 5 (“always”), and items were asked of both stepparents ($\alpha = .94$) and biological parents ($\alpha = .93$) to obtain perceptions about biological parents’ restrictive gatekeeping from the perspectives of both stepparents and parents. Stepparents’ example items included: “How often does your spouse/partner make you do what they want you to do with [focal child]?” “How often does your spouse/partner supervise your interactions with [focal child]?” “How often does your spouse/partner criticize you as a parent?” “How often does your spouse/partner say sarcastic comments when you interact with [focal child]?” Biological parents answered questions framed from their perspective, such as: “How often do you attempt to undermine your spouse’s parenting decisions?” “How often do you make your spouse do what you want them to do with [focal child]?” Latent factor scores were estimated for both stepparent and biological parent reports of parent restrictive gatekeeping using methods described further below.

Stepparent attachment orientation

Stepparent attachment orientation was measured using an item that asked stepparents to select one of three paragraph-long descriptions that best represented their general feelings about their interpersonal attachment orientations (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Originally developed as a measurement of romantic relationship attachment orientation, the descriptions were modified to reflect attachment orientations to family members rather than to romantic partners. We did not specify which family members participants were to consider when responding. Each description aligned with one of three general attachment orientations: secure, anxious, or avoidant. For example, “I find it relatively easy to get close to others and am comfortable depending upon them and having them depend on me. I don’t often worry about being abandoned or about someone getting too close to me” was the choice representing securely attached orientations. “I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others; I find it difficult to trust them completely, difficult to allow myself to depend on them. I am nervous when someone gets too close, and often, family members want me to be more intimate than I feel comfortable being” assessed avoidant attachment, and “I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like. I often worry that family members don’t really love me or won’t want to stay with me. I want to merge completely with another person, and this desire sometimes scares people away” was the anxious attachment choice. Dummy variables were generated for each of the categorical responses.

Stepparents’ affinity-seeking

Stepparents’ affinity-seeking was measured using 30 items ($\alpha = .97$) from the Stepparent Affinity-Seeking and -Maintaining Scale (Ganong, 2017). The content of the items was generated from earlier qualitative work focused on stepparents’ affinity-seeking strategies (Ganong et al., 1999). Specifically, stepparents were asked to respond to items asking how frequently they engaged in various interactions with the focal child. Items included the following: “You express concern when [focal child] has problems and disappointments,” “You teach [focal child] skills,” “You say nice things about [focal child] to other people in his/her presence,” and “You get involved in [focal child’s] activities.” Biological parents completed the same set of 30 items ($\alpha = .98$) to report their perceptions of

stepparents' affinity-seeking (e.g., "your spouse teaches [focal child] skills"). Ordinal response options for all items ranged from 1 ("never") to 7 ("always"). All items were coded such that higher values indicated higher levels of stepparent affinity-seeking. Latent factor scores were estimated for both stepparent and biological parent reports of stepparent affinity-seeking using methods described further below.

Covariates

Several sociodemographic covariates were included in the analysis to further isolate the influence of parent restrictive gatekeeping and stepparent attachment orientation on stepparent affinity-seeking. Covariates included (a) the duration of the couple relationship (continuous variable measured in years), (b) number of children in the household (continuous variable), (c) focal child's age (continuous variable measured in years), (d) focal child's biological sex (0 = male, 1 = female), (e) stepparent's sex (0 = male, 1 = female), (f) biological parent's report of household income (ordinal measure, ranging from 1 ["less than \$10,000"] to 11 ["\$100,000 or more"]), (g) parents' racial/ethnic identity (0 = White, 1 = non-White), and (h) stepparents' racial/ethnic identity (0 = White, 1 = non-White). Unfortunately, relatively limited numbers within each racial/ethnic minority group made a more granular approach to coding the racial/ethnic identity variables infeasible.

Data Analysis

To address our hypotheses, we employed actor-partner interdependence modeling (APIM) in a structural equation modeling (SEM) framework (Cook & Kenny, 2005; Kline, 2011). APIM is an appropriate method for handling dyadic data, which are nested and nonindependent. APIM also has the advantage of being able to estimate associations between one dyadic member's reports of independent and dependent variables (i.e., actor effects), as well as estimate associations between one dyadic member's reports of an independent variable and the other dyadic member's reports of a dependent variable (i.e., partner effects). Thus, in our model we included *stepparent reports* of parent restrictive gatekeeping, stepparent attachment orientation, and stepparent affinity-seeking; and *biological parent reports* of parent restrictive gatekeeping and stepparent affinity-seeking.

To begin, we specified individual measurement models for each multi-item construct (i.e., parent restrictive parenting and stepparent affinity-seeking) and estimated latent factor scores. Because measurement items were ordinal, we used a means- and variance-adjusted weighted least squares (WLSMV) estimator and polychoric input correlation matrix for the measurement models (Bovaird & Koziol, 2012). Each measurement model yielded acceptable and significant measurement parameters (which are available upon request). Then, all latent factor scores were treated as observed variables in a structural model, with stepparent and biological parent reports of stepparent affinity-seeking regressed on stepparent and biological parent reports of parent restrictive gatekeeping, stepparent reports of stepparent attachment orientation, and covariates. Given the substantive focus on stepparent attachment, we estimated the structural model with two main specifications. Model 1 specified stepparents indicating a secure attachment orientation as the reference group, whereas Model 2 specified stepparents indicating an avoidant attachment orientation as the reference group. This approach allowed us to statistically compare outcomes in our model between each pairing of stepparent attachment orientation (three dummy-coded variables, with one omitted as the reference category).

After confirming that the distributions of latent factor scores were not burdened by significant skewness or kurtosis, we estimated the structural model and used a maximum

likelihood (ML) estimator. The following criteria were specified as indicators of acceptable model fit: Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and Tucker–Lewis Index values of .90 or higher, and a root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) value of .08 or lower (Chen, Curran, Bollen, Kirby, & Paxton, 2008; Curran, Bollen, Chen, Paxton, & Kirby, 2003; West, Taylor, & Wu, 2012). Missing data were handled using full-information maximum likelihood procedures (Enders, 2010), although only 1.3% of all data points in the current study were missing. Stata 15.0 was used for data management and ancillary analyses, whereas Mplus 8.0 was used for estimating preliminary measurement models and the final structural model.

RESULTS

Table 1 displays results associated with our ancillary analyses, including the following descriptive statistics: means, standard deviations, minimum values, and maximum values for substantive continuous variables (i.e., affinity-seeking and gatekeeping); and proportions or percentages for categorical substantive variables (i.e., stepparent attachment). We conducted bivariate analyses to assess whether differences across substantive variables were present between mother–stepfather families and father–stepmother families. Results from two-tailed, independent-samples *t*-tests and chi-squared tests indicated no significant differences. See Table 1 for more details.

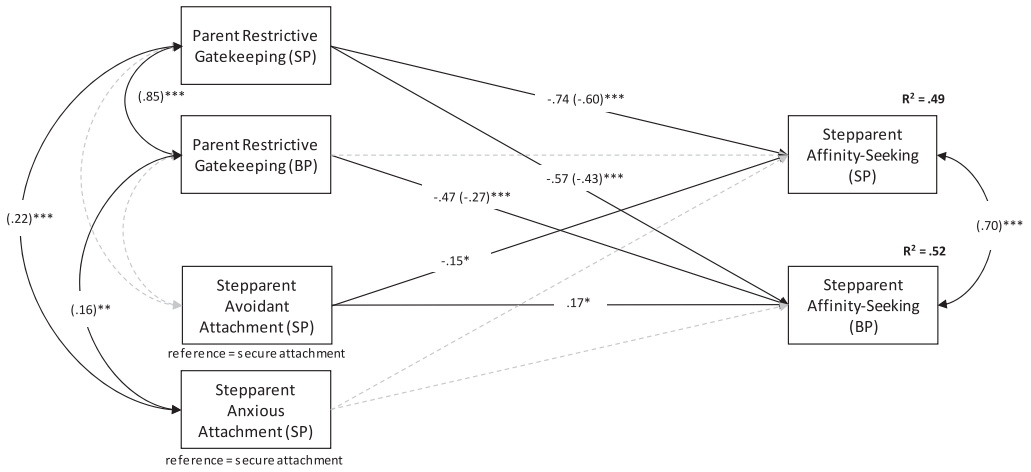
Figure 1 displays the results from the final structural model. Results are presented for both Model 1, in which stepparents with secure attachment orientations were specified as the reference group (i.e., contrasted with anxious and avoidant orientation groups), and Model 2, in which stepparents with avoidant attachment orientations were specified as the reference group (i.e., contrasted with secure and anxious orientation groups). The final model yielded acceptable fit, as indicated by the following fit indices: $\chi^2(32) = 48.16$,

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics and Assessment of Differences Between Family Types

Variable	Full sample				Mother–stepfather families (n = 238)		Father–stepmother families (n = 53)		Bivariate χ^2 test or two-tailed <i>t</i> -test <i>p</i> values
	<i>M</i> or %	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max	<i>M</i> or %	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i> or %	<i>SD</i>	
Stepparent affinity-seeking (SP)	5.52	0.98	1.00	7.00	5.50	1.01	5.60	0.87	0.49
Stepparent affinity-seeking (BP)	5.40	1.17	1.00	7.00	5.39	1.18	5.48	1.10	0.62
Parent restrictive gatekeeping (SP)	1.83	0.73	1.00	5.00	1.84	0.73	1.80	0.73	0.74
Parent restrictive gatekeeping (BP)	1.75	0.62	1.00	5.00	1.76	0.61	1.72	0.71	0.65
Stepparent secure attachment	58.4%				57.6%		62.3%		0.53
Stepparent avoidant attachment	32.3%				33.6%		26.4%		0.31
Stepparent anxious attachment	9.3%				8.8%		11.3%		0.57

Note. SP indicates stepparent report; BP indicates biological parent report. Two-tailed, independent-samples *t*-tests and chi-square tests were conducted to assess differences between mother–stepfather and father–stepmother families.

Model 1: Secure attachment as reference group



Model 2: Avoidant attachment as reference group

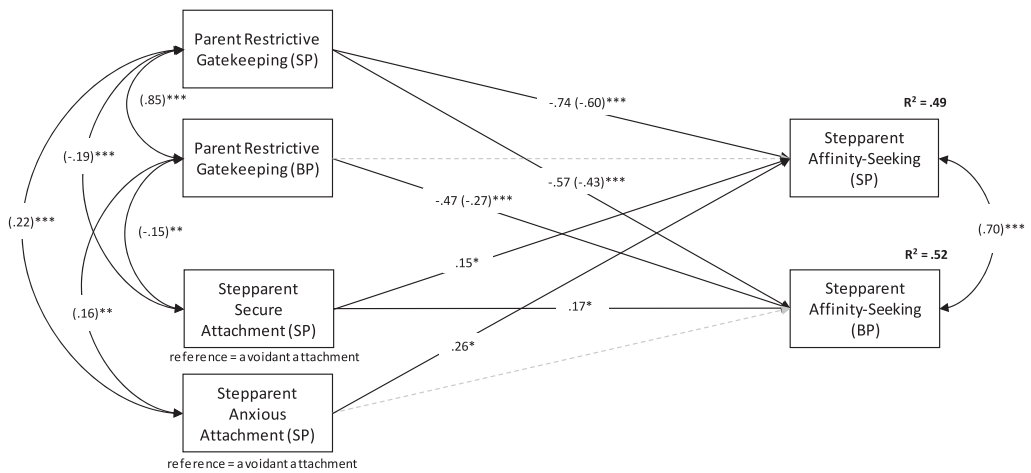


FIGURE 1. Actor-Partner Interdependence Model of Stepparent Affinity-Seeking Regressed on Parent Restrictive Gatekeeping and Stepparent Attachment ($N = 291$).

Note. $*p \leq .05$; $**p \leq .01$; $***p \leq .001$. SP indicates stepparent report; BP indicates biological parent report. Parameters in parentheses are standardized. Maximum Likelihood estimator was used; $\chi^2(32) = 48.16, p = .03$; CFI = .97, TLI = .98; RMSEA = .042 (upper 90% CI = .065). Model covariates were (a) relationship duration, (b) number of children in household, (c) child age, (d) child sex, (e) stepparent sex, (f) household income, (g) parents' racial/ethnic identity, and (h) stepparents' racial/ethnic identity. Factor scores were estimated for stepparent affinity-seeking and parent restrictive gatekeeping and used in this model as observed variables.

$p = .03$; CFI = .97; TLI = .98; and RMSEA = .042 (upper 90% CI: .065). Overall, the model explained 49% and 52% of the variance in stepparent affinity-seeking from stepparent reports and biological parent reports, respectively. Because Models 1 and 2 were

statistically equivalent (i.e., only the reference group for the dummy-coded variables representing attachment orientation was rotated between model specifications), they yielded identical fit indices.

Turning to our first hypothesis, results indicated a significant *actor effect* between stepparent attachment orientation and stepparent affinity-seeking. Stepparents who reported having an avoidant attachment orientation reported, on average, .15 units less affinity-seeking than stepparents who reported having a secure attachment orientation ($p \leq .05$), net the influence of stepparents' and parents' reports of parent restrictive gatekeeping and covariates. Moreover, stepparents who reported having an avoidant attachment orientation also reported, on average, .26 units less affinity-seeking than stepparents who reported having an anxious attachment orientation ($p \leq .05$). Levels of stepparents' reports of stepparent affinity-seeking did not significantly differ between stepparents who had an anxious orientation versus stepparents who had a secure orientation. In terms of *partner effects*, results indicated that stepparents' reports of stepparent attachment orientation were also associated with parents' reports of stepparent affinity-seeking. Stepparents who reported having an avoidant attachment orientation had partners who reported, on average, .17 units less of stepparent affinity-seeking compared to stepparents who reported having a secure attachment orientation ($p \leq .05$), net the influence of stepparents' and parents' reports of parent restrictive gatekeeping and covariates.

With respect to our second hypothesis, results indicated significant *actor effects* between parent restrictive gatekeeping and stepparent affinity-seeking. Stepparents' reports of parent restrictive gatekeeping were strongly and negatively associated with their reports of affinity-seeking ($b = -.74$, $\beta = -.60$, $p \leq .001$). Indeed, a one-standard deviation increase in stepparents' reports of parent restrictive gatekeeping was associated with a .60-standard deviation decrease in stepparents' reports of stepparent affinity-seeking; net the influence of stepparent attachment orientation, parents' reports of parent restrictive gatekeeping, and covariates. A similar actor effect emerged for biological parents ($b = -.47$, $\beta = -.27$, $p \leq .001$), such that a one-standard deviation increase in parents' reports of parent restrictive gatekeeping was associated with a .27-standard deviation decrease in parents' reports of stepparent affinity-seeking; net the influence of stepparent attachment orientation, stepparents' reports of parent restrictive gatekeeping, and covariates. In terms of *partner effects*, stepparents' reports of parent restrictive gatekeeping were strongly and negatively associated with parents' reports of stepparent affinity-seeking ($b = -.57$, $\beta = -.43$, $p \leq .001$). Specifically, a one-standard deviation increase in stepparents' reports of parent restrictive gatekeeping was associated with a .43-standard deviation decrease in parents' reports of stepparent affinity-seeking; net the influence of stepparent attachment orientation, parents' reports of parent restrictive gatekeeping, and covariates. See Figure 1 for more details.

In terms of significant covariates, stepchildren identifying as female ($b = .12$, $p \leq .05$) and household income ($b = .02$, $p \leq .05$) were positively associated with stepparents' reports of stepparent affinity-seeking. Similarly, stepchildren identifying as female ($b = .15$, $p \leq .05$) and household income ($b = .02$, $p \leq .05$) were positively associated with parents' reports of stepparent affinity-seeking. Stepchildren's ages were negatively associated with parents' reports of stepparent affinity-seeking ($b = -.02$, $p \leq .05$).

DISCUSSION

Understanding stepparents' affinity-seeking behaviors and the factors that may inhibit or promote these behaviors has important implications for family therapists, family life educators, and researchers. In this study we examined two possible influences on

stepparents' affinity behaviors: stepparents' attachment orientation and biological parents' restrictive gatekeeping behaviors. Our findings largely supported our hypotheses.

Stepparent Attachment Orientations and Affinity-Seeking

The first hypothesis, that stepparents' attachment orientation would affect the amount of affinity-seeking, was partially supported. Securely attached stepparents engaged more frequently in affinity behaviors than did stepparents with avoidant attachment orientations, but there was not a difference between securely attached and anxious stepparents (stepparents' and biological parents' results were similar). Avoidant stepparents also engaged in fewer affinity behaviors than did anxious stepparents (stepparents and biological parents had similar responses). The hypothesis was not fully supported, however, because there were no differences in the frequency of affinity behaviors by stepparents with secure attachment orientations and stepparents with anxious attachment, according to both stepparents and biological parents. The findings are clear that stepparents with avoidant attachment orientations engaged in significantly fewer affinity behaviors than other stepparents.

We did not entirely expect this—we thought secure stepparents would be more frequent affinity-seekers than *both* avoidant and anxious stepparents, and we did not expect anxious stepparents to engage significantly more in affinity-seeking behaviors than avoidant stepparents. Anxious stepparents, concerned about being loved and accepted by their stepchildren, may engage in affinity-seeking with stepchildren as a way to bond with them, just as securely attached stepparents do, but their motivations may be different. Stepparents with secure attachment orientations may engage with their stepchildren because they genuinely enjoy interacting with other people. Attachment anxiety has been described as an activating strategy, meaning that individuals with anxious attachment orientations are energized to seek approval, proximity, and love from relationship partners, even while not expecting these efforts to be fruitful or fulfilling (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012). Affinity-seeking behaviors are congruent with activating strategies, which may explain why stepparents with anxious attachment orientations would be more eager and willing to engage in friendship-building behaviors with stepchildren than stepparents with avoidant attachment orientations. In contrast, individuals with avoidant attachment orientations are more likely to hide their feelings, be reserved, and avoid taking emotional risks when in newer or less-established relationships (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012). These are deactivating strategies that inhibit affinity-seeking efforts (Jensen et al., 2015). Stepparents with avoidant attachment orientations without previous childrearing experiences may be particularly prone to avoid taking risks by affinity-seeking with stepchildren. When stepchildren resist these attempts, a not-infrequent response (Bray & Kelly, 1998; Hetherington & Clingempeel, 1992), then avoidant stepparents are more likely to withdraw than those with other attachment orientations. It may be that some of the stepparents in prior studies who engaged in fewer affinity-seeking behaviors (e.g., Ganong et al., 1999) had avoidant attachment orientations that made it difficult for them to take the emotional and interpersonal risks necessary to reach out to stepchildren.

Parent Gatekeeping and Stepparent Affinity-Seeking

We found strong support for our second hypothesis. In the APIM analyses, significant actor and partner effects were found—stepparent reports of parent restrictive gatekeeping were strongly and negatively associated with both stepparent and parent reports of stepparent affinity-seeking (actor and partner effects). Parent reports of parent restrictive gatekeeping also negatively (but more weakly) were associated with parent reports of stepparent affinity-seeking. Stepparents and parents saw the co-occurrences of gatekeeping and affinity-seeking similarly.

Our expectation that parental restrictive gatekeeping would be related to less affinity-seeking by stepparents was supported. Parental gatekeeping may discourage stepparents from trying to befriend their stepchildren. Given that the data are cross-sectional, it also may be that when stepparents engage in less affinity-seeking behaviors, parents gatekeep more. Restrictive parental gatekeeping is motivated by various reasons—parents may fear that new partners are not competent caregivers, they may want to protect the safety and well-being of their children, and they may feel uncomfortable with changes to family system rules and internal family boundaries (e.g., Ganong et al., 2014; Weaver & Coleman, 2010). Some parents, especially mothers who have been single parents for some time, may be unwilling to share access to their children or to surrender their roles as the key figure in their children's lives, and they may resist intrusions into their strong parent-child bonds (Weaver & Coleman, 2010). They may have remarried to gain a partner for themselves while functionally continuing to be a single parent. Other mothers are so used to protecting their children from having their feelings hurt (e.g., if fathers abandoned children after separation) that they may gatekeep, at least in the beginning of the repartnership, to protect their children from further pain if the relationship does not work out. Fathers may restrictively gatekeep for some of the same reasons as mothers—they may want to protect close bonds with children formed as single parents. These sundry motives may be more important to parents than their desires to facilitate stepparent-stepchild bonding, and if that is the case, they engage in more restrictive than facilitative gatekeeping. Stepfamilies are complex, and competing goals and motivations of stepfamily members (i.e., parents' desires to control childrearing of their biological children and stepparents' desires to bond with stepchildren) make effective stepfamily functioning more challenging, at least for some stepfamilies.

It should be noted that both mothers and fathers engaged in restrictive gatekeeping of their spouses. Other researchers also have found that restrictive gatekeeping is not a phenomenon limited to mothers (see Ganong et al., 2016, for a review).

It also should be noted that both stepparents' and biological parents' perceptions of restrictive parental gatekeeping were significantly and positively correlated with anxious attachment (see Model 1) and avoidant attachment (see Model 2). In contrast, parental gatekeeping was not significantly related to secure attachment orientations in Model 1 and was significantly and negatively correlated with secure attachment in Model 2. These associations suggest that parental gatekeeping and stepparent attachment orientations are not independent phenomena; instead, there may be mutual effects operating. We cannot determine what these correlations mean, given our study design, but they suggest future inquiry may be useful.

Implications for Practice

Positive, emotionally close relationships among stepparents and stepchildren are important for relational and family well-being (Ganong et al., 1999), so gaining further understanding of the intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics surrounding affinity-seeking will assist professionals who work with stepparents and stepfamilies who are trying to bond and build new relationships; this information may be particularly useful for new stepfamilies and clinicians who work with them.

One implication of these findings for practitioners is that infrequent affinity-seeking may be partially explained by qualities stepparents brought with them into the stepfamily. Stepparents bring a lot to the stepfamilies they form—personal interests, skills, beliefs, knowledge, attitudes, personalities—and all of these intrapersonal characteristics likely are relevant to how they interact with other family members. Attachment

orientation is another intrapersonal characteristic stepparents “bring” to the stepfamily, and in our study, we found that attachment orientations had implications for affinity-seeking with stepchildren. Helping professionals can benefit from this knowledge as they consider the types of therapeutic approaches most appropriate for their clients. For instance, emotionally focused therapy (EFT) seeks to improve relationships by increasing individuals’ attachment security (Johnson & Brubacher, 2016). Such an approach may be particularly appropriate for stepparents whose avoidant attachment orientation prevents them from making efforts to bond with stepchildren.

In seeking to enhance stepparent-stepchild relationships through affinity-seeking, clinicians and stepfamilies should also be reminded of the diverse benefits of affinity-seeking on stepfamily relationships and dynamics. Prior research has found that stepparents’ affinity-seeking actions are not only related to the quality of stepparent–stepchild relationships (Ganong et al., in press; Ganong et al., 2011) but also to marital quality (Ganong et al., in press), and high-quality dyadic bonds are associated with individual and family well-being (Jensen & Harris, 2017a,b; Jensen et al., 2018; King, 2006). Put simply, affinity-seeking with stepchildren may be a key behavior for stepparents wanting to develop satisfying and stable family relationships (Browning & Artelt, 2012; Ganong et al., 1999; Papernow, 2013).

Given the benefits of stepparents’ affinity-seeking, biological parents should be cognizant of the extent to which they restrict these efforts. In fact, we found stronger negative effects for parental restrictive gatekeeping than for stepparents’ insecure attachment orientation, suggesting that gatekeeping may be more salient than attachment orientation in understanding why stepparents do or do not exert efforts to bond with stepchildren. When biological parents engage in more restrictive gatekeeping (e.g., criticizing stepparents’ parenting, supervising stepparents’ interactions with children), stepparents engage in less affinity-seeking. Parents may benefit from therapeutic support to consider how their gatekeeping behaviors (however well-intentioned) may be discouraging stepparent–stepchild bonding.

Limitations and Future Directions

The conclusions and implications of the current study should be tempered by some limitations. For one, our sample was not a clinical sample and so clinical implications should be understood within this context. In addition, the sample was relatively homogenous with respect to racial/ethnic identity. We also limited the sample to remarried couples to control for potential differences in family dynamics between remarried and cohabiting stepfamilies—this decision reduced the generalizability of the study but allowed us to recruit enough couples to conduct the study despite our limited resources. The design of this study was also cross-sectional; therefore, causal inferences are untenable. A more diverse sample collected in a longitudinal study design would assist researchers in making causal inferences, in part because gatekeeping and attachment orientations may differ across racial and ethnic backgrounds and over time. A longitudinal design would also allow researchers to more closely examine the relations among stepparent attachment orientation and parental gatekeeping; determinations about causal influences between these constructs and possible interactions among them, which we could not do with this cross-sectional design. The way in which attachment orientation was measured in this study did not allow us to make inferences about the degree to which avoidant orientations inhibit or deactivate affinity-seeking, because we used categorical operational definitions of attachment orientations and not measures that would have allowed us to assess the extent to which respondents ascribed to avoidance as an orientation. Future researchers should employ continuous measures of attachment orientations, which will allow estimations of

the magnitude of the effects of avoidant attachment on affinity-seeking. Continuous measures of attachment also will provide researchers with more complex views of how attachment orientations covary with affinity-seeking. Moreover, measuring biological parents' attachment orientations would allow future researchers to assess how partners' attachment orientations may have influenced stepparents' capacity to connect with their children. Finally, a broader assessment of gatekeeping behaviors is needed; facilitative gatekeeping may enhance stepparents' affinity-seeking behaviors. Future research should examine this possibility.

We should also note that the current study possessed a number of strengths. We had a relatively sizable sample of stepfamilies that included both mother–stepfather and father–stepmother families (while controlling for stepparent sex). In addition, the use of dyadic data allowed us to examine the perceptions of both partners—a methodological feature too seldom applied in the stepfamily literature. Also worth noting is the congruence among stepparents' and biological parents' perceptions about the significant associations in our model; the relations examined in this study were noticed by both partners in the stepcouple. This lends some credibility to the robustness of the findings.

CONCLUSION

Researchers and clinicians alike have argued that the stepparent–stepchild bond is critical to stepfamily functioning and often determinant of the survival of the remarriage (Browning & Artelt, 2012; Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Papernow, 2013). As such, developing positive stepparent–stepchild relationships has been identified as a major task of stepfamily life. Although much has been done to examine outcomes associated with close stepparent–stepchild ties, we know less about the processes through which those relationships develop (e.g., affinity-seeking) or the factors that may impede that process (e.g., attachment orientation or gatekeeping behaviors). This study contributes to our understanding of the factors that impede stepparents' ability to initiate bonding efforts with stepchildren—stepparents' avoidant attachment and parents' restrictive gatekeeping—yielding important implications for stepfamilies and practitioners. Better understanding of the intrapersonal characteristics and interpersonal dynamics that influence the stepparent–stepchild relationships will be important for promoting healthy and satisfying relationships in complex kinship networks.

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