

Stepparent–Child Relationship Quality and Couple Relationship Quality: Stepfamily Household Type as a Moderating Influence

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Abstract

Stepparent–child relationships and new couple relationships are core pillars of stepfamily functioning and well-being. Although research generally indicates that stepparent–child relationship quality and couple relationship quality are positively associated, questions remain about in which contexts and from whose perspective this association holds. Using reports from parents and stepparents in a sample of 291 stepfamily heterosexual couples, we assess whether stepfamily household type (i.e., mother–stepfather, father–stepmother) moderates the association between stepparent–child relationship quality and couple relationship quality. Results indicate that stepparent–child relationship quality and couple relationship quality are positively associated in both mother–stepfather and father–stepmother families, and from the vantage point of both parents and stepparents. The positive association is significantly larger in mother–stepfather families

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from the vantage point of stepfathers. Implications for future research and practice with stepfamilies are discussed.

Keywords

couple relationships, family relationships, relationship quality, stepparent–child relationships, stepfamily

Stepfamily formation is increasingly common in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2011). Stepfamilies are formed when one or both partners in a new committed relationship bring a child or children from previous relationships (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Over time, scholars and practitioners have attended to stepfamily experiences and outcomes, in large part because of the unique demands stepfamilies face relative to families that do not experience structural transitions (Browning & Artelt, 2012; Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Papernow, 2013). Common stepfamily demands include disagreements about parenting between parents and stepparents, conflict between youth and new stepparents, negotiating co-parenting responsibilities between resident and nonresident parents, strains between youth and resident parents, ambiguity about the roles and functions of stepfamily members, family relocations, and shifts in social and economic resources (Coleman, Ganong, & Russell, 2013; Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Jensen, 2017; Jensen & Howard, 2015; Jensen & Shafer, 2013; Papernow, 2013).

The quality of newly formed and extant relationships is a major crux of stepfamily functioning and stability (Coleman et al., 2013; Jensen & Weller, 2019; Papernow, 2013). The qualities of stepparent–child relationships and new couple relationships, in particular, are linked with stepfamily outcomes and the well-being of stepfamily members (Ganong, Jensen, Sanner, Russell, Coleman, & Chapman, 2019; Jensen & Harris, 2017a, 2017b; Jensen & Lippold, 2018; Jensen, Lippold, Mills-Koonce, Fosco, 2017; King, 2006). Rather than operating in isolation, evidence suggests that stepparent–child relationship quality and couple relationship quality are interconnected. Typically, as the quality of one relationship increases, the quality of the other increases; and vice versa, as the quality of one decreases, the quality of the other decreases as well (Jensen & Harris, 2017a, 2017b; Jensen & Howard, 2015; Jensen & Shafer, 2013, King, 2006; Pleck & Hofferth, 2008). However, there remain uncertainties about the nature of this interconnection, such as (a) for which stepfamily household types (e.g., mother–stepfather versus father–stepmother) the association is most pronounced, and (b) for whom the interconnection is perceived and experienced (e.g., biological parents versus

stepparents). A family systems perspective (Carr, 2016; Cox & Paley, 2003), empirical literature (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Schmeeckle, 2007), and clinical literature (Papernow, 2013) highlight the potential for nuance on these fronts; addressing these uncertainties could provide important insights for researchers who want to examine stepfamily complexity more thoroughly and for family practitioners who seek to support stepfamilies in cultivating high-quality, satisfying relationships.

To address gaps in the literature, the core aim of the current study is to examine the association between stepparent–child relationship quality and couple relationship quality across two stepfamily household types headed by heterosexual couples—mother–stepfather and father–stepmother. Thus, drawing from a family systems perspective, we examine whether stepfamily household type moderates an association between stepparent–child relationship quality and couple relationship quality. In addition, we build on past research by including reports from both stepparents and biological parents in stepfamilies—a valuable feature given the disparate experiences and role functions of stepparents and parents (Papernow, 2013). We begin by reviewing the literature and theory related to connections between stepparent–child relationship quality and stepfamily couple relationship quality. We then provide rationale for assessing this connection in relation to (a) stepfamily household type and (b) parent versus stepparent perspectives.

Stepparent–Child Relationship Quality and Couple Relationship Quality

Family systems theory highlights the relational interdependencies that families can experience (Carr, 2016; Cox & Paley, 2003). Indeed, family subsystems such as dyads can yield dynamics and qualities that exert influence on other family subsystems and the family as a whole. Such relational interdependencies in stepfamilies have garnered increasing empirical attention over time (King, Thorsen, & Amato, 2014). Consistent with a family systems perspective, the association between stepparent–child relationship quality and couple relationship quality is likely bidirectional. On one hand, nonconflictual and harmonious stepcouple dynamics can help children feel more comfortable cultivating a close and warm relationship with a new stepparent over time (Jensen & Shafer, 2013; Papernow, 2013). On the other hand, a high-quality relationship between youth and their stepparent can foster closeness and ease tensions within the stepcouple relationship, as biological parents might feel content with the role and contributions of their new partner in the family system (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Jensen, Shafer, & Larson, 2014; Weaver & Coleman, 2010). A

bidirectional association between stepparent–child relationship quality and couple relationship quality could reflect positive spillover effects and circular causality, consistent with a family systems perspective (Cox & Paley, 2003; Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 2012). Some research also suggests that gains in the quality of a new stepcouple relationship can, in some instances, adversely impact children in the form of poorer functioning and weakened family relationships (Jensen, 2017; Papernow, 2013). Taken together, linkages between stepparent–child relationships and couple relationships appear dynamic and warrant ongoing empirical investigation.

In the current study, we focus on and conceptualize stepparent–child relationship quality as a predictor of couple relationship quality. Although couple relationships and stepparent–stepchild relationships may develop concurrently and, as noted, may reciprocally affect each other, the couple relationship is an elective one and the stepparent–stepchild tie usually is not (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Given that stepchildren and their stepparent typically do not voluntarily attempt to create a relationship, but are brought together by virtue of their mutual ties to the biological parent, these step-kin bonds are often more fragile and fraught with tension than the couple relationship ties, at least initially and early in the life of a stepfamily. Consequently, the quality of the stepparent–stepchild relationship may be a strong predictor of how the couple relationship develops. Some empirical precedents support the contention that relationships between children and a new stepparent are important correlates of stepfamily dynamics and other relational outcomes (Crosbie-Burnett, 1984; Ganong et al., 2019). We also thought that foregrounding the stepparent–child relationship in this study might provide potential leverage points for practitioners who work with stepfamilies to bolster positive family outcomes. In our view, this framing of stepparent–child relationships helps balance the general emphasis placed on couple relationship quality in extant family education programs and curricula for stepfamilies (Lucier-Greer & Adler-Baeder, 2012).

Differences by Stepfamily Household Type

Stepfamilies are not monolithic. Given the diverse pathways that can precede stepfamily formation, stepfamily households can vary with respect to background and composition. One common set of stepfamily households are those headed by a mother and stepfather; that is, families in which mothers share residence with their child or children from prior unions and a new male partner. Over 4 million children in the United States resided in mother–stepfather households in 2009 (Kreider & Ellis, 2011). Another set of stepfamily households are those headed by a father and stepmother, or families in which

fathers share residence with their child or children from prior unions and a new female partner. Nearly 1.2 million children in the United States resided in a father–stepmother family household in 2009 (Kreider & Ellis, 2011).

Due to gendered norms that influence families in general, the experiences of individuals in mother–stepfather families and father–stepfamilies can differ markedly (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). For one, the so-called *motherhood mandate* (Russo, 1976) in Western cultures can exert greater pressure on women, relative to men, to engage in parenting instinctually, naturally, and with a greater share of accountability and responsibility (Braverman, 1988). Although not studied extensively, evidence suggests that gendered norms influence stepfamily relationships as well (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Schmeekle, 2007).

In one qualitative study, Weaver and Coleman (2010) identified a set of primary role functions that mothers in mother–stepfather households assumed. These functions were gatekeeper, defender, mediator, and interpreter. As gatekeepers, mothers in mother–stepfather households reported efforts to control stepfathers’ access to and interactions with children over time. As defenders, mothers reported they were likely to protect children from perceived threats to children’s safety or well-being, even if threats arose from other household residents, such as stepparents. As mediators, mothers reported attempts to mediate conflicts between children and the new partner. Lastly, as interpreters, mothers reported efforts to cultivate empathy and understanding between children and their new partner over time. Although fathers in stepfamilies could assume these role functions, it is likely that these functions are exhibited disproportionately among mothers in stepfamilies, in part due to gendered norms and pressures (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Gold & Adeyemi, 2013; Schwartz & Finley, 2006; Weaver & Coleman, 2010). Although not studied extensively, past research suggests that stepmothers are more likely than fathers to serve as kin-keepers in father–stepmother families—another indication that gendered norms exert influence in stepfamilies (Schmeekle, 2007).

Taken together, the common role functions assumed by mothers in mother–stepfather households could yield stronger connections between the quality of the stepparent–child relationship and the quality of the couple relationship relative to father–stepmother families. Indeed, the attainment of a high-quality stepparent–child relationship could signal to mothers that their role functions in stepfamily life (i.e., gatekeeper, defender, mediator, and interpreter) have been fruitful, and could ease pressure among mothers to continue executing demanding role functions in stepfamily life. As a result, mothers could experience greater levels of happiness and satisfaction with their new partner. Researchers have yet to formally test the extent to which

stepfamily household type (i.e., mother–stepfather, father–stepmother) moderates the association between stepparent–child relationship quality and couple relationship quality.

Perceptions of Stepfamily Relationships: Parents Versus Stepparents

In addition to examining differences across stepfamily household types, there also is a need to examine perceptions of stepfamily relationships from both stepparents and biological parents. Biological parents often have known their children for years before the formation of the stepfamily, and the bonds of obligation and loyalty they have formed are substantively different than the more recently created relationships of children with their stepparents (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Biological parents are tasked with maintaining ongoing ties with their children when a stepfamily is formed, while stepparents have the very different task of forming connections with their stepchildren, which includes defining their roles and getting to know each other. As noted in the clinical literature, stepparents often occupy an “outsider” status in stepfamilies, especially early in stepfamily formation (Papernow, 2013). That is, stepparents often experience difficulty integrating into existing family dynamics. Biological parents, on the other hand, often occupy an “insider” status in stepfamilies, as they are central figures in prior family dynamics. Consequently, stepparents might be especially sensitive to the development of their relationships with stepchildren and their new partners over time; however, the development of these relationships is also of concern to biological parents. Ultimately, biological parents and stepparents can experience the transition to stepfamily life in dramatically different ways, and there is value in tapping into the perceptions of both biological parents and stepparents.

Current Study

Stepfamilies are complex, and it is likely that structural differences between household types affect relationships within those households. For example, children in stepfamilies live with fathers often for different reasons than they do mothers, such as differential awards of physical custody between mothers and fathers after divorce (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Given the gendered expectations for parents and stepparents, structural differences between stepfamily households may impact stepparenting, new couple relationships, and the dynamics of the households.

The quality of stepparent–child relationships and of couple relationships, along with their potential interdependence, is an important aspect of

the stepfamily experience and has implications for the well-being of stepfamily members. To address current gaps in the literature, the primary aim of the current study is to examine the association between stepparent–child relationship quality and couple relationship quality in the context of two common stepfamily household types: mother–stepfather and father–stepmother. We focus on the potential for stepfamily household type to moderate the link between stepparent–child relationship quality and couple relationship quality.

Methods

Data and Procedures

Data were acquired via the Qualtrics platform. Qualtrics has created panels of volunteers. Individuals from adult panels were told that we were conducting a study about stepfamily relationships. Suitable respondents were those who (a) were remarried, (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. Only couples who met the criteria were included in the sample—a 13-point checklist was used to ensure that respondents met the criteria. Responses to the online survey were provided by eligible respondents and their partners independently. Survey questions were issued that related to respondents’ perceptions of stepfamily dynamics and relationships. Questions focused on the stepparent–child relationship were based on the same target child, who was the oldest child residing in the household more than half of the time, and who was one partner’s child and the other partner’s stepchild.

To begin, prospective respondents accessed a link to the online survey, and inclusion criteria were assessed through a double opt-in process. Ineligible participants were then thanked and dismissed from participation, whereas eligible participants were able to provide informed consent and access the survey. Two methods were used to identify participants’ spouses. First, we asked participants for their spouses’ contact information, and the spouses were invited to participate in the survey. Spouses then decided if they would like to participate in the survey. If the spouse agreed to participate, they were directed to the online survey. If they did not agree to participate, they were thanked, and the survey was closed and the initial spouse’s data were not used. This method proved cumbersome. Consequently, we allowed both spouses to read consent materials concurrently and decide whether they would like to participate in the survey. If both spouses agreed to participate, they were directed to the survey. If they did not agree to participate, they were

thanked, the survey was closed, and neither spouse's data were used for the study. Eligible respondents were provided an incentive valued at \$11 for completing the online survey.

It was critical that each couple included in the sample was comprised of one stepparent and one biological parent in relation to the target child. Thus, we asked the first spouse of each couple to identify as the target child the oldest child residing in the household more than half of the time who was either their child from a previous relationship or their stepchild. The respondents were asked a series of questions to aid them in selecting this child, and space in the survey was provided for respondents to enter the child's name. The child's name then appeared as the target child when the spouse of the initial respondent completed the survey.

Sample

The sample for the current study included 291 couples, each comprised of one stepparent and one biological parent (in relation to the target child). The average duration of couple relationships was 7.92 years ($SD = 4.15$). Roughly 82% of stepparents were stepfathers, and about half of the target children identified as female. Target children were, on average, 11.98 years old ($SD = 3.91$ years). The average number of children in households was 3.21 ($SD = 1.42$), and biological parents 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%).

The majority of both biological parents and stepparents identified as White. Specifically, about 81% of biological parents identified as White, 9% identified as Hispanic/Latinx, 6% identified as Black or African American, and 3% identified as multi-racial; the remaining 1% of biological parents identified as Asian, American Indian/Alaskan Native, or Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Island. Approximately 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 multi-racial; the remaining 1% of stepparents identified as Asian or Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Island.

Measures

Couple relationship quality. Couple relationship quality was measured using the Quality Marriage Index (Norton, 1983). Five items asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement with the following statements: “We have a

good marriage,” “My relationship with my partner is stable,” “Our marriage is strong,” “My relationship with my partner makes me happy,” and “I really feel like a team with my partner.” Response options for these items were ordinal and ranged from 1 (“very strongly disagree”) to 7 (“very strongly agree”). The remaining item asked respondents to indicate their level of relationship happiness, ranging from 1 (“very unhappy”) to 10 (“perfectly happy”). All items were coded such that higher values indicated higher levels of couple relationship quality. Internal consistent reliability of the six items was strong for both stepparent reports ($\alpha = .92$) and biological-parent ($\alpha = .93$) reports. Using methods described in the Data Analysis subsection, latent factor scores were estimated for both stepparent and biological-parent reports.

Stepparent–child relationship quality. Stepparent–child relationship quality was measured with a modified version of the Child–Parent Relationship Scale (Pianta, 1992), which was adapted for use with stepparents. Fifteen items asked respondents to indicate whether certain features, interactions, or characteristics applied to the stepparent–child relationship. From the perspective of stepparent respondents, items included “I share an affectionate, warm relationship with [target child],” “[target child] values his/her relationship with me,” “[target child] openly shares his/her feelings and experiences with me,” and “If upset, [target child] will seek comfort from me.” Response options were ordinal and ranged from 1 (“definitely does not apply”) to 5 (“definitely applies”). The items were coded such that higher values indicated higher levels of stepparent–child relationship quality. Stepparents ($\alpha = .93$) responded to items describing their relationship with their stepchild; biological parents ($\alpha = .92$) responded to items describing their partner’s relationship with their child (i.e., biological parents were not describing their own relationship with their child). Thus, perceptions about the quality of the stepparent–child relationship were captured from the vantage point of both the stepparent and biological parent. Using methods described in the Data Analysis subsection, latent factor scores were estimated for both stepparent and biological-parent reports of stepparent–child relationship quality.

Stepfamily household type. Stepfamily household type indicated whether a stepfamily was headed by (a) a mother and stepfather or by (b) a father and stepmother. Coded as a binary variable, values of 1 indicated father–stepmother families. Values of 0 indicated mother–stepfather families.

Covariates. Consistent with the Contextual Model of Family Stress (Boss, Bryant, & Mancini, 2017) and Sociocultural Family Stress Model (Smith & Landor, 2018)—two models based on family system theory—we included

several sociodemographic covariates in our analyses that could influence family processes and dynamics. Covariates included (a) the duration of the couple relationship (continuous variable measured in years), (b) number of children in the household (continuous variable), (c) target child's age (continuous variable measured in years), (d) target child's biological sex (0 = male, 1 = female), (e) 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). Limited numbers within each racial/ethnic minority group made a more granular approach to coding infeasible.

Data Analysis

To effectively handle measurement error, we first estimated latent factor scores for both couple relationship quality and stepparent-child relationship quality (Brown & Moore, 2012). Latent factor scores were then used in subsequent multivariate modeling. Because items for these scales were ordinal, we used a means- and variance-adjusted weighted least squares estimator and polychoric correlation matrix to estimate latent factor scores (Bovaird & Koziol, 2012). Measurement models yielded significant and acceptable measurement parameters (i.e., factor loadings). Mplus 8.0 was used for these analyses. Attempts were made to examine measurement invariance between household types, although the relatively low number of father-stepmother households ($n = 52$) rendered this approach analytically infeasible due to a suboptimal sample size-to-parameters ratio (Kline, 2011).

After confirming that the distribution of our outcome variable, couple relationship quality, was not burdened by skewness or kurtosis, we then employed ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to assess the association between stepparent-child relationship quality and couple relationship quality. Stata 15.1 was used for these analyses. To aid the interpretation of results, latent factor scores for couple relationship quality and stepparent-child relationship quality were standardized (i.e., mean = 0, $SD = 1$) prior to model estimation. Two OLS regression models were estimated. The first model estimated the main effects of stepparent-child relationship quality and stepfamily household type on couple relationship quality, net the influence of covariates. In the second model, we added an interaction term between stepparent-child relationship quality and stepfamily household type. The two models were estimated separately for stepparent reports and biological-parent reports. That is, one set of models assessed associations between stepparent reports of independent variables and the dependent variable, whereas

another set of models incorporated biological-parent reports. Only 0.2% of all values in the dataset were missing, and Little's chi-squared test indicated these data were Missing Completely at Random (MCAR; Little, 1988; χ^2 distance = 0.77, $df = 2$, $p = .68$). Multiple imputation, with 15 imputations, was used to handle missing data in the regression models (Enders, 2010).

Results

For context, Table 1 displays descriptive information for the full sample and descriptive information for each stepfamily household type (i.e., mother-stepfather and father-stepmother). Note that for these analyses, composite scores were estimated from the raw items associated with couple relationship quality and stepparent-child relationship quality. In terms of significant differences across stepfamily household type, compared to mother-stepfather families, father-stepmother families reported (a) higher levels of couple relationship quality (6.24 versus 5.70, in unstandardized units), (b) a higher average age among focal youth (13.36 years versus 11.67 years), (c) higher levels of household income, and (d) a lower proportion of biological parents identifying as non-White (9% versus 21%).

Table 2 displays results associated with the main-effects models. Results from these models indicated that stepparent-child relationship quality was positively associated with couple relationship quality from the perspective of both stepparents ($b = .47, p < .001$) and biological parents ($b = .45, p < .001$), net the influence of covariates. Because stepparent-child relationship quality and couple relationship quality were standardized, the coefficients can be interpreted as follows: a one-standard deviation increase in stepparents' reports of stepparent-child relationship quality was associated with a .47 standard deviation increase in stepparents' reports of couple relationship quality, net the influence of covariates; and a one-standard deviation increase in biological parents' reports of stepparent-child relationship quality was associated with a .45 standard deviation increase in biological parents' reports of couple relationship quality, net the influence of covariates. Among only biological parents, stepfamily household type was significantly associated with couple relationship quality. Specifically, biological parents in father-stepmother household families (i.e., biological fathers) reported higher mean levels of couple relationship quality than biological parents in mother-stepfather household families (i.e., biological mothers; $b = .35, p < .05$). That is, on average, biological fathers reported higher levels of couple relationship quality than biological mothers.

Table 2 also displays results associated with the interaction models. Results indicated that the interaction term between stepparent-child relationship quality and stepfamily household type was only significant from the

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics.

Variable	Full Sample				Mother- Stepfather Families (n = 238)		Father- Stepmother Families (n = 53)		
	M or %	SD	Min	Max	% Missing	M or %	SD	M or %	SD
Couple relationship quality (SP) ^a	6.07	1.20	1	7	0.0%	6.05	1.15	6.14	1.40
Couple relationship quality (BP) ^a	5.80	1.37	1	7	0.0%	5.70	1.38	6.24**	1.25
Stepparent-child relationship quality (SP) ^a	3.94	0.83	1	5	0.3%	3.95	0.82	3.93	0.85
Stepparent-child relationship quality (BP) ^a	4.03	0.81	1	5	2.1%	4.04	0.80	4.01	0.85
Relationship duration (years)	7.92	4.15	0.92	20.00	0.0%	7.97	4.15	7.71	4.16
Number of children in household	3.21	1.42	1.00	8.00	0.0%	3.17	1.40	3.40	1.47
Child age	11.98	3.91	2.00	17.00	0.0%	11.67	3.99	13.36**	3.20
Child sex (1 = female)	49%				0.0%	51%		43%	
Household income	6.06	3.01	1.00	11.00	0.0%	5.79	2.95	7.28**	3.01
Biological parent racial identity (1 = non-White)	19%				0.0%	21%		9%*	
Stepparent racial identity (1 = non-White)	24%				0.0%	26%		15%	

Note: ^aComposite scores were estimated using the raw items. 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.
 * $p \leq .05$; ** $p \leq .01$.

Table 2. Couple Relationship Quality (Standardized) Regressed on Stepparent–Child Relationship Quality (Standardized), Stepfamily Household Type, and Interaction Term: Stepparent and Biological-Parent Reports.

Variable	Stepparent Reports			Biological-Parent Reports		
	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
Stepparent–child relationship quality (standardized) ^a	0.47	(0.05) ^{***}	0.54	(0.06) ^{***}	0.45	(0.05) ^{***}
Stepfamily household type (1 = father–stepmother)	0.06	(0.14)	0.03	(0.14)	0.35	(0.14) [*]
Stepparent–child relationship quality X Stepfamily household type			–0.37	(0.14) ^{**}	–0.12	(0.14)
Relationship duration	–0.04	(0.01) ^{**}	–0.05	(0.02) ^{**}	–0.01	(0.01)
Number of children in household	–0.02	(0.04)	–0.02	(0.04)	–0.03	(0.04)
Child age	0.03	(0.02)	0.03	(0.02)	0.01	(0.02)
Child sex (1 = female)	–0.09	(0.10)	–0.09	(0.10)	–0.22	(0.10) [*]
Household income	0.03	(0.02)	0.03	(0.02)	0.02	(0.02)
Biological parent racial identity (1 = non-White)	–0.22	(0.17)	–0.21	(0.17)	–0.37	(0.17) [*]
Stepparent racial identity (1 = non-White)	0.15	(0.16)	0.14	(0.16)	0.25	(0.16)
Constant	–0.07	(0.22)	–0.10	(0.22)	0.00	(0.21)
R ²	0.24		0.26		0.25	
Incremental R ²			0.02 ^{**}		0.00	

Note: ^{*}p < .05; ^{**}p < .01; ^{***}p < .001. ^aStepparent reports of stepparent–child relationship quality were used when modeling stepparent reports of couple relationship quality; biological-parent reports of stepparent–child relationship quality were used when modeling biological-parent reports of couple relationship quality.

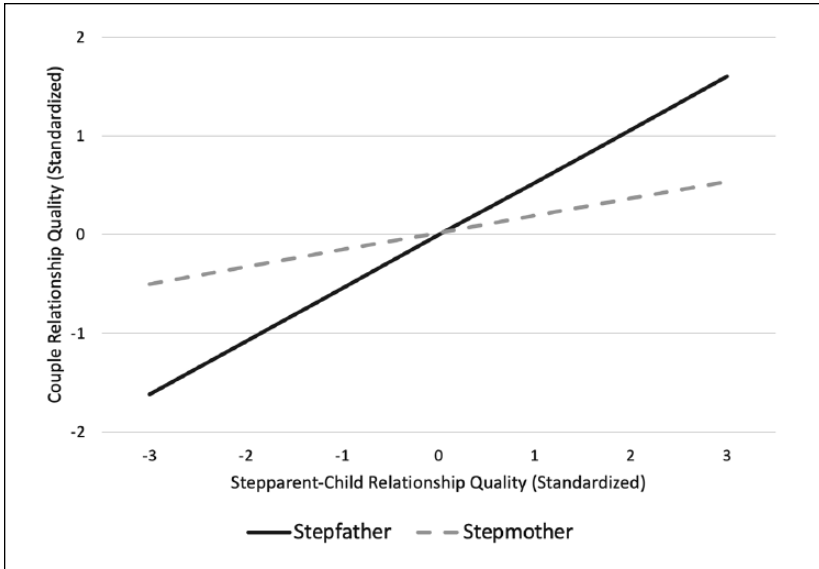


Figure 1. Interaction Effect of Stepfamily Household Type on Association Between Stepparent–Child Relationship Quality (Standardized) and Couple Relationship Quality (Standardized), Stepparent Reports.

Note: Unit metrics on both the y-axis and x-axis indicate the number of standard deviations, with a value of 0 indicating sample-mean levels. All covariates are set to sample-mean levels.

perceptions of stepparents ($b = -.37, p < .01$; as indicated by the significant interaction term in the model using stepparent reports and the non-significant interaction term in the model using biological-parent reports). The significant and negative interaction effect indicated that the positive association between stepparents’ reports of stepparent–child relationship quality and couple relationship quality was attenuated in father–stepmother household families relative to mother–stepfather household families. That is, increases in stepparents’ reports of stepparent–child relationship quality were associated with lower gains in couple relationship quality for stepmothers compared to stepfathers. Figure 1 illustrates the significant interaction effect between stepparents’ reports of stepparent–child relationship quality and stepfamily household type on couple relationship quality.

Discussion

The quality of new stepfamily relationships is linked to stepfamily functioning, stability, and well-being (Ganong et al., 2019; Ganong & Coleman,

2017; Jensen & Weller, 2019). Stepparent–child relationship quality and couple relationship quality, in particular, are central and interrelated pillars of stepfamily life (Coleman et al., 2013; Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Jensen & Howard, 2015; Papernow, 2013). The primary aim of the current study was to assess the moderating influence of stepfamily household type on the association between stepparent–child relationship quality and couple relationship quality. In addition, we sought to bolster the existing literature by incorporating reports from both stepparents and biological parents.

Consistent with previous research and a family systems perspective, our findings highlight a sizable and positive association between stepparent–child relationship quality and couple relationship quality from the viewpoint of stepparents and biological parents in both mother–stepfather and father–stepmother households. In general, gains in stepparent–child relationship quality are linked to gains in couple relationship quality. Our findings provide additional evidence of the potential for positive spillover effects and circular causality in stepfamily relationships (Cox & Paley, 2003; Robbins et al., 2012). Moreover, it is notable that both stepparent and biological-parent reports in our sample yielded large, positive associations between stepparent–child relationship quality and couple relationship quality.

Our findings also highlight important nuances with respect to stepfamily household type and parental status (i.e., stepparent versus biological parent). Indeed, stepfamily household type appears to moderate the association between stepparent–child relationship quality and couple relationship quality, but only among stepparent reporters. Specifically, relative to stepmothers, stepfathers perceive larger gains in couple relationship quality in conjunction with increases in stepparent–child relationship quality. As discussed earlier, this could be due to the relative weight some mothers place on connections between their new partners and their children (Weaver & Coleman, 2010; Schmeckle, 2007). Such a phenomenon could be driven, at least in part, by the *motherhood mandate* (Russo, 1976) in Western cultures summarized earlier, which culturally casts motherhood as an exclusive, time-consuming, other-focused, and child-centered enterprise (Arendell, 2000). Thus, mothers in stepfamilies might especially be content with their couple relationship when their new partners and children exhibit a relationship marked by warmth, affection, open communication, and mutual satisfaction. The formation of a stepparent–child relationship resembling these characteristics could also signal to mothers that any gatekeeping, defending, mediating, and interpreting roles they employ are effective. Although the interaction effect was not significant among biological-parent respondents in our sample, stepfathers are likely responsive to their partners, which could be reflected in their reports of stepparent–child relationship quality and couple relationship quality (and resultant correlations between the two). Said another way, the quality

of the stepparent–child relationship might be a larger piece of the couple relationship quality equation for stepfathers relative to stepmothers, in part due to gendered norms associated with stepfamily life.

Conversely, in the event that stepparent–child relationships are marked by conflict or mutual dissatisfaction, mothers might feel pressure to redouble their efforts to manage stepfamily dynamics. This pressure could create tension within the couple, resulting in diminished relationship quality, especially from the vantage point of the stepparent. As noted earlier, stepparents often occupy an “outsider” status, positioning them for relatively greater sensitivity to stepfamily dynamics as they attempt to graft into existing family relationships and interactions (Papernow, 2013). It appears that stepfathers might be more sensitive overall to these dynamics relative to stepmothers.

Another possibility is that men in general, and stepfathers in particular, might be more easily satisfied in their relationships relative to women and stepmothers. Indeed, there is evidence that men generally experience less pressure and fewer expectations than women with respect to parenting (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Schmeeckle, 2007). Consequently, stepfathers might more easily meet role expectations relative to stepmothers, resulting in stepfathers’ reports of relatively higher levels of couple relationship quality, as well as a relatively stronger positive association between stepparent–child relationship quality and couple relationship quality.

Our findings might also be explained by other structural nuances. For instance, some stepfamilies are categorized as “simple” stepfamilies, which indicates that only one adult in a new couple relationship brings a child or children from previous relationships into the household (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). Other stepfamilies are categorized as “complex” stepfamilies, which indicates that both adults in a new couple relationship bring a child or children from previous relationships into the household (Ganong & Coleman, 2017). In the event that mother–stepfather household families in our sample are more likely than father–stepmother household families to be simple stepfamilies, this difference could drive some of the observed differences in how stepfathers and stepmothers experience linkages between stepparent–child relationship quality and couple relationship quality. Although our data do not speak to whether stepfamilies are simple or complex, this would be an area worthy of future study.

It is worth re-emphasizing the fact that among biological parents, we did not observe a significant moderating effect of stepfamily household type on the association between stepparent–child relationship quality and couple relationship quality. Perhaps this indicates that biological parents in stepfamilies experience positive linkages between the qualities of various stepfamily relationships somewhat uniformly, and without respect to biological sex or

gender. On the other hand, as we note in our discussion of limitations and ideas for future research, limited statistical power could explain the non-significant interaction effect among biological-parent respondents (the interaction term for biological parents trended in the same direction as the interaction term for stepparents).

Limitations and Future Research

Our study conclusions should be interpreted in the context of some limitations. For one, our sample was relatively homogenous with respect to racial/ethnic identity. Although some respondents identified as Hispanic/Latinx, Black or African American, Asian, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Island, or multiracial; our results might not fully generalize to stepfamilies with these identities given the proportion of respondents in our sample who identify as White (i.e., 81% of biological parents and 76% of stepparents). Our sample was also comprised of opposite-sex couples; future research should attend to relationship-quality associations in stepfamilies headed by same-sex couples. Because our sample included only remarried couples, our results also might not fully generalize to cohabiting stepfamilies. Fortunately, our sample did possess notable variation with respect to household income.

The data for this study were also cross-sectional, and did not allow for a longitudinal assessment of the association between stepparent-child relationship quality and couple relationship quality. The use of longitudinal data in the future will aid in understanding the prominent direction of influence between the quality of these two relationships. As noted earlier, we contend that the association is likely bidirectional, and longitudinal models would allow for the exploration of bidirectional and transactional effects. We did conduct a supplemental path analysis, whereby stepparent-child relationship quality and couple relationships quality were bidirectionally associated. In this model, stepparent-child relationship quality remained a significant predictor of couple relationship quality; however, couple relationship quality was not a significant concurrent predictor of stepparent-child relationship quality. Thus, in our cross-sectional case, stepparent-child relationship quality appeared to be the relatively stronger antecedent.

We also note that our sample contained a limited number of father-stepmother household families; however, the proportion of father-stepmother families in our sample (18%) mirror national estimates (23%; Kreider & Ellis, 2011). Although the interaction term between stepparent-child relationship quality and stepfamily household type was significant among stepparent reports, a larger quantity of father-stepmother household families

could yield higher statistical power such that a significant moderating effect could possibly be detected among biological-parent respondents. Future research should aim to over-sample for father–stepmother household families to further explore differences by stepfamily household type with added statistical power and precision.

Although we incorporated information from both stepparents and biological parents, the absence of youth reports is another limitation of the current study. Valuable insights can be gained by incorporating youth perceptions about stepfamily experiences (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Dunn, 2002; Gamache, 1997; Jensen & Howard, 2015). Future research in this area will be strengthened by including youth reports of stepparent–child relationship quality and couple relationship quality. Future research could also explore the extent to which a focal child’s sex moderates associations between stepparent–child relationship quality and couple relationship quality.

Implications

Limitations notwithstanding, our study extends the existing literature and points to some insights that could inform practice with stepfamilies. Foremost, practitioners should be mindful of the possibility that gains in some stepfamily relationships might promote gains in other relationships. In particular, the cultivation of a high-quality stepparent–child relationship could yield dividends in the couple relationship. This phenomenon may appear in both mother–stepfather families and father–stepmother families and be perceived by both parents and stepparents. Based on the results of this study, stepfathers are especially likely to observe positive interconnections between stepparent–child relationship quality and couple relationship quality.

In terms of identifying strategies for promoting stepparent–child relationship quality, there is a growing body of knowledge around this topic. A recent systematic review synthesized research focused on predictors of stepparent–child relationship quality from the viewpoint of youth (Jensen & Howard, 2015). Predictors cluster into several core domains, including individual characteristics, family characteristics, and stepparent–child interactions. Stepparent–child interactions, in particular, include malleable intervention targets, such as positive communication patterns between stepparents and youth, and stepparents’ affinity-seeking competence and behavior (Ganong, Jensen, Sanner, Russell, & Coleman, 2019; Ganong, Coleman, Fine, & Martin, 1999). Affinity-seeking reflects strategies stepparents employ to connect with their stepchildren. Such efforts are optimized when stepparents initially focus on cultivating friendships with their stepchildren, followed by continuous investment in the relationships (Ganong et al.,

1999). Practitioners can support stepparents in their efforts to connect with their stepchildren in ways that are appropriate and desirable for a given family. It is worth noting that high-quality stepparent–child relationships can come in many different forms (Crohn, 2006; Jensen, 2019; Weaver & Coleman, 2005).

The stepparent–child relationship is a two-way street. Youth are more likely to be responsive to stepparents' overtures when stepparents are evaluated by youth as making positive contributions to the family (Ganong, Coleman, & Jamison, 2011). The probability that youth will be responsive to stepparents' efforts to connect are also influenced by youth age, youth sex, stepparent sex, and the time spent together in the same residence (as influenced by custody arrangements; Ganong et al., 2011). Consequently, practitioners can be mindful of youth characteristics, evaluations, and contexts as they assist stepfamilies in building a mutually satisfying stepparent–child relationship over time. Practitioners can also encourage stepfamilies to be patient with the process of stepparent–child relationship development. Even in the best of circumstances, mutually satisfying and high-quality stepparent–child relationships can take a significant amount of time to develop (Papernow, 2013), especially when stepchildren are adolescents.

We should also note that not all stepfamilies experience positive interdependencies across the quality of dyadic relationships. Indeed, some stepfamilies can experience negative interdependencies across dyadic relationships (Jensen, 2017), such that gains in the quality of one relationship could be linked to declines in the quality of another relationship. Thus, there is potential for some stepfamilies to experience relationship-building as a zero-sum exercise. It behooves practitioners to continually note the impact on other stepfamily relationships of any intervention targeting a specific dyadic relationship (Jensen, 2017).

At this point, we should also note that efforts remain warranted to directly strengthen the couple, or other, relationships in stepfamilies (Lucier-Greer & Adler-Baeder, 2012). As noted earlier, there is reason to believe that in many stepfamilies the quality of stepparent–child relationships and couple relationships is bidirectionally related and transactional. Thus, efforts to strengthen the new couple relationship in stepfamilies could yield gains in stepparent–child relationship quality (Jensen & Howard, 2015; Jensen & Shafer, 2013), which in turn could yield further gains in the couple relationship.


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