

Latent Profiles of Residential Stepfamily Relationship Quality and Family Stability

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ABSTRACT

Stepfamilies are an increasingly common context in which adults and children reside. Past research has examined family processes that promote family resilience, such as dyadic relationships marked by warmth, positive communication, satisfaction, and closeness. What remains less clear is whether various profiles of dyadic relationship quality within stepfamilies exist and operate to influence stepfamily stability. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health, we conducted a latent profile analysis of mother–child, stepfather–child, and stepcouple relationship quality among a sample of 1,646 adolescents residing in married and cohabiting mother–stepfather families. Results favor a 4-profile solution, labeled high-quality, high-quality couple relationship, high-quality parent–child relationships, and low-quality. The identified latent profiles displayed differences with respect to family stability, or rates of remaining an intact family system 1 year later.

KEYWORDS

family process; family stability; latent profile analysis; relationship quality; stepfamily

Stepfamilies are one of the fastest growing family forms in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2011). Stepfamilies are formed when one or both partners in a new married or cohabiting relationship have a child or children from a previous relationship (Coleman, Ganong, & Russell, 2013). Nearly one third of all children are estimated to live in a stepfamily household before reaching adulthood (Bumpass, Raley, & Sweet, 1995; Pew Research Center, 2011), making stepfamilies a common developmental context for youth in the United States. Indeed, of the 50.8 million children who lived with two parents in 2009, 5.3 million (10.4%) lived with a biological parent and a stepparent (Kreider & Ellis, 2011).

Although stepfamilies are increasingly prevalent, the transition to stepfamily life can be ambiguous and stressful (Cherlin, 1978; Coleman et al., 2013). Common challenges faced by members of stepfamilies include family boundary and role ambiguity, coparenting conflict, declines in parent–child relationship quality, stepparenting issues, clashing family cultures, loyalty conflicts,

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family relocation, and social stigma (Coleman et al., 2013; Jensen & Shafer, 2013; Pace, Shafer, Jensen, & Larson, 2015; Papernow, 2013; Shafer, Jensen, Pace, & Larson, 2013). Moreover, stepfamily stressors are often preceded by or compounded with other stressful family transitions and processes, such as the adjustment to parental divorce, separation, or death (Coleman et al., 2013). Because of these stressors and experiences, stepfamilies, on average, experience less stability over time compared to continuously intact families (Hetherington, Bridges, & Insabella, 1998; Whitton, Stanley, Markman, & Johnson, 2013).

Although stepfamilies can be conceptualized as being at risk of family instability and dissolution, scholars and clinicians have adopted a normative-adaptive perspective (Coleman & Ganong, 1990; Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000) and turned their attention to factors that promote stepfamily functioning and resilience (e.g., Henry, Morris, & Harrist, 2015; Patterson, 2002). One way to promote resilience in families is to focus on positive and adaptive family-level characteristics and processes (Hetherington & Elmore, 2003), including positive, supportive, and warm relational dynamics between stepfamily members (Coleman et al., 2013). Further, the nature and dynamics of stepfamily relationships are relatively malleable or modifiable, making them suitable targets for research and intervention (Fraser & Galinsky, 2010).

Despite evidence linking positive family processes to stepfamily resilience, it remains unclear how the quality of various dyadic relationships within stepfamilies operates to influence stepfamily stability. Stepfamilies are capable of experiencing disparate levels of relationship quality across at least three core dyads: the parent-child dyad, the stepcouple dyad, and the stepparent-child dyad (Papernow, 2013). For example, new stepparents might compete with children for the biological parent's time and energy, leading to children feeling neglected and resentful (King, 2009). Moreover, conflict between a new stepparent and child—a common issue in stepfamilies—could cause strain in the biological parent-child relationship (Jensen & Harris, 2017). These conditions might lead to higher quality stepcouple relationships, but lower quality stepparent-child and parent-child relationships (Papernow, 2013). Conversely, some parents might center their attention and efforts on caring for biological children, leading to the simultaneous decay of the stepcouple relationship and maintenance of high-quality parent-child bonds.

Given the strengths that many members of stepfamilies possess, however, it is possible for stepfamilies to report having high-quality relationships across all dyads. For example, in what Papernow (2013) called “aware stepfamilies,” the adults possess high levels of empathy, sensitivity, realistic expectations, and communication skills—conditions suitable for the sustenance of high-quality parent-child, stepparent-child, and stepcouple relationships. Thus, the entrance of a new stepparent might yield social and emotional dividends for families and children. Further, because the quality of

the dyadic relationship within stepfamilies is interconnected (e.g., Jensen & Shafer, 2013; King, Thorsen, & Amato, 2014), gains in one dyad might promote gains in others. Taken together, it seems plausible that stepfamilies can exhibit various dyadic profiles of relationship quality with respect to parent-child, stepparent-child, and stepcouple dyads; however, the quantitative exploration of such profiles has received scant attention in the literature (see Jensen, 2017; Amato, King, & Thorsen, 2016; for two relevant exceptions; other related stepfamily profiles have also been presented; e.g., Baxter, Braithwaite, & Bryant, 2006; Erera-Weatherley, 1996; Ganong, Coleman, & Jamison, 2011; Papernow, 2013; Weaver & Coleman, 2005).

The existence of various profiles of dyadic relationship quality within stepfamilies is plausible based on several theoretical perspectives and frameworks. First, a family systems perspective posits that families are complex systems, comprised of multiple subsystems that are interconnected (Cox & Paley, 1997). A family systems orientation thus suggests that different profiles of interactions might occur within a family system. Moreover, this perspective indicates that dyadic patterns and interactions could be more informative and predictive of family outcomes (e.g., stability) than an isolated view of patterns or interactions within any particular dyad or subsystem. Second, the circumplex model of marital and family systems posits that the health and functioning of families and their members are optimized when families obtain balanced levels of both cohesion and flexibility (Olson, 2011). Cohesion is defined as “the emotional bonding that family members have toward one another” (Olson, 2011, p. 65). Thus, cohesion is conceptualized as a family-level characteristic, encompassing the nature of relationships among all family members, not solely one family dyad or various family dyads in isolation. Moreover, cohesion is conceptualized as something that can vary across families. Third, the family resilience framework highlights key family processes that promote family resilience, including organizational patterns and communication processes that reflect connectedness; mutual support, collaboration, and commitment; strong parental relationships; open emotional sharing; mutual empathy; and pleasurable interactions (Walsh, 2002). These processes are employed at family and dyadic levels, involving all members of a family system. Consequently, there is value in assessing relational dynamics inclusively across the family system, with the possibility of variation or distinct profiles of family-resilience processes across dyads.

From clinical and family-life education perspectives, practitioners could benefit from the ability to identify particularly at-risk stepfamilies as indicated by profiles of quality among dyadic relationships. In particular, profiles of relationship quality within stepfamilies might vary in terms of being most or least predictive of stepfamily instability. Levinger’s (1965) model of marital dissolution posits that the stability of a couple is a function of the social and psychological attraction (i.e., rewards minus costs) and barrier forces inside

the relationship, as well as the inverse function of social and psychological attraction and barrier forces associated with alternative relationships. Thus, different profiles of stepfamily relationship quality might be evaluated as being unattractive or unrewarding, highly rewarding and attractive, or merely tolerable—each with implications for a couple’s decision to remain intact.

From a research perspective, the stepfamily literature is replete with variable-centered analyses by which unidimensional phenomena are statistically analyzed. Although such studies are helpful in understanding the means or averages of phenomena, the literature would benefit from more person-centered analyses (Amato et al., 2016; Jensen, 2017), such as latent profile analysis (LPA; Lanza, Flaherty, & Collins, 2003). LPA is a person-centered (rather than variable-centered) approach. This type of analysis can more fully capture the complexity of stepfamily relationships and their collective impact on stepfamily stability (see van Eeden-Moorefield & Pasley, 2013, for a discussion of methodological gaps in the stepfamily literature).

Using a nationally representative sample of adolescents residing with a biological mother and stepfather, the purpose of our study is to address the following research questions:

- (1) Do latent profiles exist among mother–stepfather families that represent varying patterns of mother–child, stepfather–child, and stepcouple relationship quality?
- (2) How does latent profile membership influence stepfamily stability (i.e., the occurrence of stepfamily dissolution)?

Methods

Data and Sample

Data came from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health (Add Health), a nationally representative study of adolescents in the United States. A total of 20,745 adolescents in Grades 7 through 12 during the 1994–1995 school year comprised the Wave I sample of in-home questionnaire respondents. Parent data ($n = 17,670$) were also collected from one parent (typically the biological mother) at Wave I. Laptop computers and audio computer-assisted self-interviewing technology were used to gather data on various topics including behavioral health, well-being, social networks, and family relationships (see Harris, 2009, for more study design details).

Of those in the full sample at Wave I, 2,756 were identified as living in mother–stepfather households. Prior research has highlighted substantive differences between mother–stepfather and father–stepmother families with

respect to various family dynamics (see Jensen & Howard, 2015). Also, nearly 80% of all stepfamily households in the United States are mother–stepfather stepfamilies. Moreover, previous research has supported a primacy-of-residence perspective, which highlights how residential relationships are especially influential in shaping outcomes in stepfamilies (King, 2006). Thus, we attended to the core dyadic relationships that comprise a residential stepfamily system; the final analytical sample was limited to include only adolescents with valid Wave I sampling weights who reported living with their biological mother and a stepfather (the use of sampling weights allows for the estimation of nationally representative model parameters). Our final analytical sample included 1,646 adolescents.

In terms of sample characteristics, 51% of the adolescent participants were female with a mean age of 15.61 years ($SD = 1.72$ years). About 58% of adolescents identified as non-Hispanic White, 21% identified as non-Hispanic Black, 17% identified as Hispanic, and 4% identified as non-Hispanic Asian, Native American, or some other racial or ethnic identity. Of the parents who reported their current marital status ($n = 1,417$), 74% reporting being married to their partner (i.e., married stepfamily) as opposed to nonmarital cohabitation. The average stepfamily duration was 6.88 years ($SD = 4.10$) at the time of the Wave I interview.

Measures

Latent profile indicators

The vast majority of studies in which stepfamily relationships are analyzed conceptualize relationship quality along a continuum (see Jensen & Howard, 2015). Thus, we used nonbinary or nonnominal items from the Wave I in-home adolescent and parent questionnaires to measure the quality of three dyadic relationships (see King et al., 2014; King, Boyd, & Thorsen, 2015; for similar measurement strategies). First, *stepfather–child relationship quality* was a composite scale measured with the following five items ($\alpha = .90$): “How close do you feel to your stepfather?” “How much do you think he cares about you?” “Most of the time, your stepfather is warm and loving toward you.” “You are satisfied with the way your stepfather and you communicate with each other.” “Overall, you are satisfied with your relationship with your stepfather.” All items were coded such that higher values indicated higher relationship quality. Response options ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree/ not at all*) to 5 (*strongly agree/very much*). Second, *mother–child relationship quality* was a composite scale measured with the same five items as the stepparent–child relationship quality scale, only items were worded to describe the mother–child relationship ($\alpha = .85$). Finally, *stepcouple relationship quality* was measured with the following item, which was presented to the adolescents’ parent: “Overall, you are satisfied with your

relationship with [your partner].” Response options ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*).

Family stability

A measure of stepfamily stability was used to address the second research question (and also allowed us to assess the predictive validity of the latent profiles). This measure was binary, such that a value of 1 indicated that the stepfamily was still intact at Wave II (i.e., the stepfather still resided in the home 1 year later), and a value of 0 indicated that the stepfamily was no longer intact. Reports came from adolescent interviews at Wave II.

Covariates

A set of covariates were included in the analysis to further demonstrate profile separation. Specifically, adolescent age (continuous variable in years), adolescent biological sex (binary variable where 1 = *female* and 0 = *male*), mother’s education (dummy coded with categories representing *less than high school*, *high school graduate/GED*, *some college*, and *college graduate or more*), adolescent racial or ethnic identity (dummy coded with categories representing *non-Hispanic White*, *non-Hispanic Black*, *Hispanic*, and *non-Hispanic Asian/Other*), household count (count of number of household residents), mother’s relationships in past 18 years (count of relationships), household income (continuous variable in thousands), and stepfamily duration (continuous variable in years, representing the length of time the stepfather has resided in the household by Wave I).

Analysis Strategy

To examine the presence of latent groups with respect to varying levels of dyadic relationship quality across residential stepfamily relationships, we employed LPA (Lanza et al., 2003; Neely-Barnes, 2010). We began by estimating a baseline model in which only one profile was specified. We then added profiles to be estimated in an iterative fashion. We used recommended sets of random start values in the model-estimation process to ensure the log likelihood of each tested model could be replicated (Muthén & Muthén, 2012).

The following criteria were used to determine which number of profiles fit the data best: (a) lowest Bayesian information criterion (BIC); (b) lowest Akaike’s information criterion (AIC); (c) all average latent class posterior probabilities valued at .80 or higher; (d) 50 cases or more per profile; and (e) conceptually sound, distinct, and interpretable profiles (Aldridge & Roesch, 2008; Bowen, Lee, & Weller, 2007; Geiser, 2013; Muthén & Muthén, 2000). A full-information maximum likelihood (FIML) method was used to handle missing data (Enders, 2010; Geiser, 2013), the analysis was weighted with the

appropriate sampling weights, and the model was adjusted for potential within-school clustering among participants.

Following the identification of the optimal profile solution, consistent with the three-step LPA procedure (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2014), we examined differences across latent profiles with respect to family stability, along with a supplemental assessment of differences in relationship quality and socio-demographic characteristics. The three-step procedure is an effective method for handling classification uncertainty—it simultaneously handles the process of extracting latent profiles, assigning respondents to their most likely profile, and assessing covariate differences across profiles (Asparouhov & Muthén, 2014). These analyses served as a form of construct validation with respect to the latent profiles. For continuous items, *Z* scores (i.e., sample mean set to 0 with a standard deviation of 1; Bauer & Shanahan, 2007) were used in addition to raw means. We used *Mplus* 8.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017) to conduct the LPA and subsequent validation analyses, whereas we used *Stata* 15.1 (StataCorp, 2017) for preliminary data management.

Results

Latent Profile Solutions

Table 1 displays model-fit results associated with all analyzed profile solutions. The analysis ranged from one to five profiles. Results indicated that a four-profile solution fit the data best with respect to our prespecified solution selection criteria. Indeed, the five-profile solution yielded an average latent class posterior probability of less than .80 (i.e., .76) and a smallest class size of less than 50 (i.e., 33). The final, four-profile solution yielded average latent class posterior probabilities ranging from .89 to .96, an entropy value of .90, and a smallest class size of 67 (4% of the total analytical sample).

Figure 1 displays the four-profile solution. We assigned labels to each profile to enhance interpretability and conceptualization. We note that these labels are purely descriptive in nature with respect to participants' responses and perceptions; the labels are not intended to assign value or judgment to the profiles. The largest proportion of participants represented the *high-quality* profile ($n = 1,310$, 80%). The high-quality profile exhibited high-quality relationships across all three stepfamily dyads. Mean values of relationship quality were 4.67 ($Z = .40$), 4.13 ($Z = .30$), and 4.53 ($Z = .31$) for mother-child, stepfather-child, and stepcouple relationships, respectively.

The *high-quality couple relationship* profile was the second most common profile ($n = 171$, 10%). This profile was marked by a relatively low-quality mother-child relationship ($M = 3.56$, $Z = -1.32$), low-quality stepfather-child relationship ($M = 2.78$, $Z = -1.18$), and average-quality stepcouple relationship ($M = 4.16$, $Z = -.10$). The *high-quality parent-child relationships*

Table 1. Selecting a Profile Solution.

		Profile Solutions																			
		2			3			4			5			5							
		1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3	4	5			
Average latent class posterior probability (matrix)	1	1.00	1	0.92	0.08	1	0.92	0.02	0.06	1	0.90	0.01	0.00	0.10	1	0.93	0.02	0.00	0.06	0.00	
	2	0.01	0.99	2	0.02	0.96	0.02	2	0.01	0.94	0.03	0.02	2	0.00	0.94	0.03	0.00	0.03	0.00	0.03	
	3	0.01	0.02	0.97	3	0.00	0.02	0.96	0.03	3	0.00	0.02	0.96	0.03	3	0.00	0.02	0.76^a	0.03	0.19	
	4	0.02	0.01	0.08	4	0.02	0.01	0.08	0.89	4	0.03	0.00	0.08	0.89	4	0.03	0.00	0.10	0.86	0.00	
	5	0.00	0.00	0.00	5	0.00	0.02	0.07	0.00	0.07	0.00	0.02	0.07	0.00	0.07	0.00	0.00	0.91	0.00	0.91	
AIC		11439.98	10532.26	10104.21		9901.45		9800.47													
BIC		11472.42	10586.32	10179.90		9998.76		9919.41													
Smallest class size		1646	185	97		67		33 ^a													
Lowest class %		100.0%	11.2%	5.9%		4.1%		2.02%													

Note: $N = 1,646$. AIC = Akaike's information criterion; BIC = Bayesian information criterion. Bold font is used to highlight the diagonal values in the mean posterior probability matrices.

^aIndicates unacceptable profile solution based on prespecified solution selection criteria.

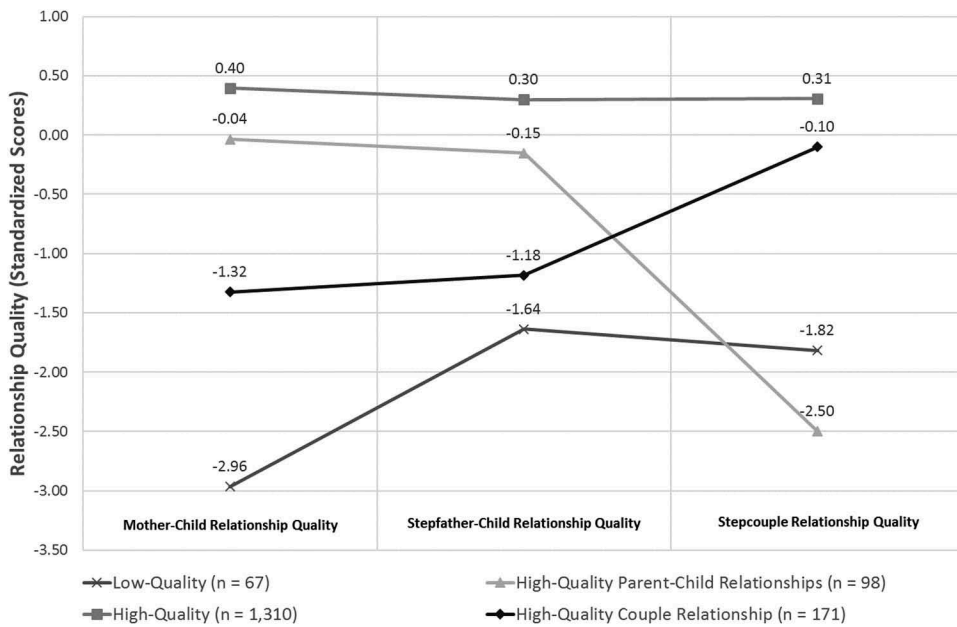


Figure 1. Visualization of relationship quality by profile.

profile was the third most common profile ($n = 98, 6\%$) and was marked by a high-quality mother-child relationship ($M = 4.39, Z = -.04$), moderate-quality stepfather-child relationship ($M = 3.72, Z = -0.15$), and low-quality stepcouple relationship ($M = 1.95, Z = -2.50$). The *low-quality* profile was the least common profile among participants ($n = 67, 4\%$). The low-quality profile was marked by low-quality relationships across all three stepfamily dyads. Specifically, mean values of relationship quality were 2.49 ($Z = -2.96$), 2.37 ($Z = -1.64$), and 2.58 ($Z = -1.82$) for mother-child, stepfather-child, and stepcouple relationships, respectively. Results from ancillary analyses indicated that the profile solution was stable when controlling for youth gender, parental marital status, and stepfamily duration.

Predicting Stability

Table 2 displays findings related to the predictive validity of the profile solution. Specifically, the latent profiles displayed differences with respect to family stability, or rates of remaining an intact family system 1 year later. About 33% of families marked by the low-quality pattern reported being intact 1 year later. The high-quality parent-child relationships and high-quality profiles yielded rates of 61% and 55%, respectively—each significantly higher than the low-quality profile. The high-quality couple relationship profile yielded a rate of 51%—a rate not significantly different from the other three profiles.

Table 2. Latent-Profile Differences.

Variable	1			2			3			4			Profile differences, <i>p</i> ≤ .05			
	Low-quality (4%) (<i>n</i> = 67)			High-quality PC relationships (6%) (<i>n</i> = 98)			High-quality (80%) (<i>n</i> = 1,310)			High-quality couple relationship (10%) (<i>n</i> = 171)						
	Mean Z score	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	Mean Z score	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	Mean Z score	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	Mean Z score	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>				
Relationship quality	4.42	0.00		2.49	0.08	-2.96	4.39	0.07	-0.04	4.67	0.01	0.40	3.56	0.04	-1.32	All significantly different 3 > 1, 2, 4; 2 > 1, 4 4 > 1, 2; 3 > 1, 2, 4 2, 3 > 1 1 > 2, 3; 4 > 2, 3 3 > 1 3, 4 > 2
Mother-child relationship quality ^a	3.86	0.00		2.37	0.31	-1.64	3.72	0.19	-0.15	4.13	0.04	0.30	2.78	0.11	-1.18	
Stepfather-child relationship quality ^a	4.25	0.00		2.58	0.37	-1.82	1.95	0.07	-2.50	4.53	0.02	0.31	4.16	0.07	-0.10	
Stepcouple relationship quality ^a	0.55		0.33	0.09	0.61	0.07				0.55	0.02		0.51	0.06		
Family stability																
Sociodemographic characteristics																
Youth age	15.61	0.00	15.57	0.28	-0.03	15.22	0.30	-0.23	15.35	0.07	-0.16	15.61	0.17	-0.01		
Youth is female	0.51		0.76	0.08		0.45	0.07		0.47	0.02		0.61	0.05			
Mother's education																
Less than high school	0.15		0.06	0.03		0.14	0.04		0.15	0.01		0.14	0.04			
High school graduate/GED	0.28		0.31	0.09		0.37	0.07		0.30	0.02		0.30	0.05			
Some college	0.28		0.30	0.09		0.14	0.04		0.26	0.02		0.30	0.05			
College graduate + Adolescent racial/ethnic identity	0.15		0.16	0.06		0.18	0.05		0.14	0.01		0.14	0.04			
Non-Hispanic White	0.57		0.51	0.09		0.58	0.07		0.57	0.02		0.64	0.05			
Non-Hispanic Black	0.21		0.26	0.09		0.22	0.06		0.23	0.02		0.20	0.04			
Non-Hispanic Asian/Other	0.04		0.08	0.05		0.07	0.04		0.04	0.01		0.04	0.02			
Hispanic	0.17		0.16	0.06		0.14	0.04		0.17	0.01		0.13	0.03			
Household count	3.85	0.00	3.93	0.23	0.06	3.64	0.16	-0.14	3.78	0.06	-0.04	3.59	0.12	-0.17		
Mother's relationships in past 18 years	2.03	0.00	2.09	0.18	0.07	2.14	0.08	0.14	2.06	0.03	0.04	2.08	0.11	0.07		

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

Variable	1		2		3		4		Profile differences, $p \leq .05$				
	Low-quality (4%) ($n = 67$)		High-quality PC relationships (6%) ($n = 98$)		High-quality (80%) ($n = 1,310$)		High-quality couple relationship (10%) ($n = 171$)						
	M	SE	M	SE	M	SE	M	SE					
Household income (in thousands)	44.30	44.92	6.01	0.02	43.89	3.79	-0.01	46.58	1.84	0.06	42.36	2.62	-0.05
Stepfamily duration	6.88	7.53	0.79	0.16	6.78	0.58	-0.03	6.76	0.18	-0.03	6.57	0.48	-0.08

Although not the focus of this study, Table 2 also displays some profile differences with respect to sociodemographic characteristics. First, female adolescents were significantly overrepresented in the low-quality (76%) and high-quality couple relationship (61%) profiles, compared to the high-quality parent-child relationships (45%) and high-quality (47%) profiles. Second, some profiles differed with respect to mother's education. A significantly larger proportion of mothers in the high-quality profile (15%) reported having less than high school educational attainment than mothers in the low-quality profile (6%). Moreover, a significantly larger proportion of mothers in the high-quality (26%) and high-quality couple relationship (30%) profiles reported having some college education compared to mothers in the high-quality parent-child relationships profile (14%). See Table 2 for additional details.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which latent profiles of residential stepfamily relationship quality existed among a nationally representative sample of mother-stepfather families. Four latent profiles emerged from our analysis, representing four distinct arrays of relationship quality across mother-child, stepfather-child, and stepcouple dyads. In order of prevalence, these profiles were labeled *high-quality*, *high-quality couple relationship*, *high-quality parent-child relationships*, and *low-quality*. The high-quality profile was the most common (80%), whereas the low-quality profile was the least common (4%). This signals to us that a reasonable portion of mother-stepfather families in the United States might be experiencing high-quality residential relationships across mother-child, stepfather-child, and stepcouple dyads.

High-quality stepfamilies consist of mother-child and stepfather-child relationships marked by closeness, caring, warmth, love, and satisfying communication. Stepouples in the high-quality profile also report having a satisfying relationship. Members of the high-quality profile might be particularly poised to experience stability, as they possess a high level of family cohesion (Olson, 2011) and exhibit organizational patterns and communication processes that foster family resilience (Walsh, 2002).

High-quality couple relationship stepfamilies possess a satisfying stepcouple relationship, but possess relatively low levels of closeness, caring, warmth, love, and satisfaction within both the mother-child and stepfather-child relationships. High-quality parent-child relationships stepfamilies have close, caring, warm, and loving relationships between parents and children, but very unsatisfying stepcouple relationships. Low-quality stepfamilies have unclosed or unsatisfying relationships across each dyad. We might expect members of the high-quality couple relationship, high-quality parent-child

relationships, and low-quality stepfamily profiles to experience less stability relative to the high-quality profile given partial deficits in family cohesion and key family resilience processes (Olson, 2011; Walsh, 2002).

Interestingly, the quality of mother–child and stepfather–child relationships appears to vary in concert, such that both the mother–child and stepparent–child relationships are fairly commensurate within three of the four profiles. Although the profile solution displays certain patterns, we find it interesting that some patterns or profiles did not emerge from the analysis. For example, no profiles emerged that centered on either a high-quality mother–child or high-quality stepfather–child relationship amid low-quality relationships across the remaining dyads.

Consistent with our theoretically driven speculations, we found that varying profiles of stepfamily relationship quality influenced family stability a year later, thus providing some substantive validation of the profiles. The high-quality and high-quality parent–child relationships profiles yielded the highest proportion of stepfamilies remaining intact 1 year after baseline. Although high-quality stepfamilies likely yield numerous benefits to both adults and children, stepfamilies marked by high-quality parent–child relationships might remain stable because the adults opt to sustain a family environment that benefits children. Thus, not unlike biologically intact nuclear families, parents and stepparents might remain in unsatisfying couple relationships to safeguard children from the stress of family dissolution and promote the children’s well-being. In terms of stepfamily stability, the similarity between high-quality and high-quality parent–child relationships stepfamilies suggests that stepfamily stability might not hinge entirely on the quality of the stepcouple relationship. Indeed, the high-quality parent–child relationships stepfamilies displayed the lowest level of stepcouple relationship quality across all latent profiles, yet displayed similar rates of family stability as high-quality stepfamilies. With respect to Levinger’s (1965) model of marital dissolution, positive parent–child and stepparent–child relationships might be a sufficient attraction or reward for parents to choose keeping the stepcouple relationship intact over time.

High-quality couple relationship stepfamilies appear to yield lower rates of family stability than high-quality and high-quality parent–child relationships stepfamilies. Although strong stepcouple relationships might yield substantial rewards for adults in stepfamilies, strain in parent–child and stepparent–child relationships might exert sufficient costs as to ultimately render the sustainment of the stepfamily system unattractive. As a result, adults in stepfamilies might opt to dissolve the stepcouple relationship. A similar and accentuated pattern could also apply to members of low-quality stepfamilies, as low-quality stepfamilies yielded the smallest proportion of families that remained intact over time.

Potential sociodemographic differences across latent profiles were also present. First, female adolescents appear to be overrepresented in stepfamily profiles marked by the lowest quality mother–child and stepfather–child relationships. This finding is consistent with previous research, which has generally indicated that stepfamily experiences can be gendered (Ganong & Coleman, 2017; Jensen & Howard, 2015). A number of studies have shown that female youth tend to struggle more than their male counterparts in the context of transitioning to stepfamily life, particularly when a stepfather is involved (Jensen & Shafer, 2013; King, 2006). Although there appear to be some differences across profiles with respect to mother’s education, a clear interpretation of these differences is elusive. The nexus of stepfamily functioning and socioeconomic experiences warrants ongoing empirical attention (Jensen & Pace, 2016).

At this point we want to note that our finding on profiles predicting stability should be considered initial and preliminary. We also note that family dissolution is not necessarily a negative outcome, as some stepfamilies might benefit from that transition, or at least not be harmed by it (Hadfield, Amos, Ungar, Gosselin, & Ganong, 2018). Additional work is needed to further substantiate associations between profiles of residential stepfamily relationship quality and indicators of stepfamily stability, and to explore the conditions under which stepfamily dissolution exerts a positive or negative influence on adults and children over time.

Limitations

Our study and its external validity were inhibited by some limitations. First, our analysis only incorporated mother–stepfather families. Although the majority of stepfamilies in the United States (i.e., 80%) are headed by mothers and stepfathers, future person-centered analyses of stepfamily relationship quality should incorporate father–stepmother families. Future work could assess the extent to which mother–stepfather families and father–stepmother families converge or diverge with respect to dyadic relationship quality. Also, marginally significant or nonsignificant profile differences in the validation analyses might stem from limited statistical power resulting from small subgroup sizes (e.g., 67 participants in the low-quality profile). In terms of measurement, our study was also limited by our use of only a single, general item to capture stepcouple relationship quality.

We also recognize that the nonresident parent–child relationship is an important consideration in the context of stepfamily life and stepfamily resilience (King, 2006, 2007); however, consistent with the primacy-of-residence perspective, we focused exclusively on residential stepfamily relationships in this study. The omission of nonresident father–child relationships also maximized our sample size, as some adolescents reported not having or

not knowing their nonresident biological fathers. Despite these limitations, our sample was relatively large and our data were nationally representative. Moreover, data were available across multiple time points, allowing us to estimate associations between stepfamily profile membership and family stability over time.

Implications for Future Research

What remains ripe for future research is a focus on the antecedents and correlates of latent profile membership. Future research should also explore how latent profile membership influences the health and adjustment of children who reside in stepfamilies. Family process models could be applied to this line of inquiry. For example, using the Boss (2002) contextual model of family stress, constellations of high- to low-quality residential stepfamily relationships could be conceptualized as social resources available to members of stepfamilies for coping with adversity or preventing high levels of stepfamily stress. With respect to the family adjustment and adaptation response model, the quality of stepfamily relationships might operate as family capabilities, defined as “tangible and psychosocial resources (what the family has) and coping behaviors (what the family does),” that help stepfamilies respond successfully to family demands (Patterson, 2002, p. 350).

Future work could also include other relationships, some of which are not centered in the primary residence, including nonresident parent–child relationships, relationships between nonresident parents and stepparents, and relationships between biological parents (not to mention sibling relationships). This area would also benefit from the inclusion of measures that capture multiple perceptions of the same relationship (e.g., youth reports and parent reports). Observational data might also be beneficial by reducing monomethod bias (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002).

Conclusion

Our findings suggest that mother–stepfather families exhibit varying patterns of residential relationship quality across mother–child, stepfather–child, and stepcouple dyads. These patterns have tentative implications for stepfamily stability and longevity. Stepfamilies with high-quality parent–child and stepparent–child relationships might provide the greatest level of stability relative to other constellations of stepfamily relationship quality, and might confer the greatest amount of stepfamily resilience. We consider this study to be an informative step toward the future application of person-centered quantitative analyses in stepfamily research—a limited but growing body of research.

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