

Stepfamilies Doing Family: A Meta-Ethnography

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Abstract

The present review examines how stepfamily members without a shared history co-construct a shared family identity and what family processes are relevant in this stepfamily formation. Three databases (Web of Science, PsycInfo, and ProQuest) were systematically searched, resulting in 20 included qualitative studies. The meta-ethnography approach of Noblit and Hare (1988) allowed synthesizing these qualitative studies and constructing a comprehensive framework of stepfamilies doing family. Three interdependent family tasks were identified: (a) honoring the past, (b) marking the present, and (c) investing in the future. Stepfamily members' experiences of these family tasks are strongly affected by the dominant societal perspectives and characterized by an underlying dialectical tension between wanting to be like a first-time family and feeling the differences of their family structure at the same time. These findings clearly demonstrate the family work all stepfamily members undertake and provide a broader context for interpreting stepfamilies' co-construction of a new family identity.

Keywords: family processes, qualitative research, review, stepfamilies

Ganong and Coleman (2004) define stepfamily as a family “in which at least one of the adults has a child (or children) from a previous relationship” (p. 2). Demographic trends in the past decades, such as divorce and an increase in cohabiting unions and nonmarital childbearing, have led to an increased likelihood for adults and children to spend part of their lives in a stepfamily (Eurostat, 2015; Papernow, 2013). Because of the importance of the institution of family in people’s everyday lives (Weigel, 2008), a greater understanding of how adults and children without a shared history become a family is needed.

The high diversity of family types in our contemporary Western society (Eurostat, 2015; Galvin, 2006) challenges scholars across different disciplines to reflect on definitions of family. Holstein and Gubrium (1999) distinguish between the essentialist definition of ‘the family’, considering family as if it were an actual observable entity with clear boundaries, and the postmodern concept of ‘family’. The latter conceptualizes family as a more fluid and ambiguous concept, constructed through social interaction by the use of language, and thus possibly changing from person to person and from time to time (Gergen, 1994; Weigel, 2008).

Within this social constructionist perspective, the current review is based on two theories, which both consider family as a verb rather than as a noun: “doing family” and “talking family”. First, doing family (Nelson, 2006; Sarkisian, 2006) has been derived from the more fully theorized concept of “doing gender” (West & Zimmerman, 2002), the idea that gender is socially constructed in everyday interactions, rather than an innate characteristic of individuals. Consequently, Sarkisian (2006) defines doing family as follows: “interactional work and activities that create and sustain family ties, define family boundaries, as well as specify appropriate behaviors for different family members” (p. 804). Not the biological or legal ties between family members make them family, but family members’ co-creation and negotiation of socially constructed boundaries, roles, and relationships. Nelson (2006) and Sarkisian (2006) state that these processes of doing family become especially apparent in non-

traditional families, thus demonstrating the relevance of studying them in the context of stepfamily formation. Second, this review draws on the family communication perspective, assuming that “storytelling is one way of doing family” (Langellier & Peterson, 2006, p. 100), expressed in the phrase “talking family” (Galvin & Braithwaite, 2014). The negotiation of boundaries, roles, and relationships is an interactional process and communication is considered as an important means by which family identity is formed (Baxter, 2004; Galvin & Braithwaite, 2014).

Based on these two theoretical frameworks, the current review plans to synthesize the available qualitative research literature about stepfamily members’ family work. We aim to contribute to the field of stepfamily research in particular by providing additional insight into stepfamily members’ experiences of doing family. In doing so, we go beyond the study of stepfamily outcomes and instead explore stepfamily processes of doing family and talking family in more detail. This absolute focus on family processes enables us to understand how individuals cope with stepfamily formation, acknowledging each family member’s agency, whereas outcome research rather tends to focus on the effect of stepfamily life on individuals’ wellbeing (Buysse & Maes, 2010; Sweeney, 2010). Agency is a multifaceted construct (Bandura, 2001), referring to “the ability to make sense of the environment, initiate change, and make choices” (Kuczynski, 2003, p. 9). Parents and children are considered to be equally agentic, both capable of making sense of their family situation and of co-constructing a stepfamily identity (Kuczynski, 2003; Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015). Therefore, the purpose of this synthesis is to centralize research findings that address how stepfamily members, both children and adults, without a shared history do family work to co-construct a new family identity and what family processes are relevant in this stepfamily formation.

Method

We applied the method of meta-ethnography (Noblit & Hare, 1988) to systematically review the available qualitative research literature. Meta-ethnography, one of the most developed and used methods for synthesizing qualitative data, is an interpretative approach originally developed by Noblit and Hare (1988) to counter the dominant positivist forms of knowledge synthesis (Hannes & Lockwood, 2012). This method of synthesis aims an interpretation that is greater than the sum of the included studies, by translating studies into one another and thereby providing new interpretations (Hannes & Lockwood, 2012). Noblit and Hare (1988) outlined seven phases in their original description of meta-ethnography. Below, our adaptation of these phases is illustrated.

Literature Search and Selection Process

First, we identified our research interest: understanding how people without a shared family history become a (step)family. Next, three electronic databases were thoroughly searched: Web Of Science, PsycInfo, and ProQuest. The initial search string was based on the aforementioned theoretical perspectives of doing family and talking family, and thus consisted of a combination of the following search terms and synonyms: (a) family boundaries, family ties, family roles, or (b) family communication, and (c) stepfamily. The systematic search was carried out in May 2016 and resulted in a total of 1165 potentially relevant references. In the second phase, these references were comprehensively assessed, adopting the following inclusion criteria.

The first inclusion criterion concerned the study's underlying epistemology. Studies presuming an absolute focus on family process research were included, outcome research and studies comparing different family structures were excluded. In doing so, we aimed to avoid an emphasis on possible deficits and stigmatizations associated with stepfamily life (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). The second inclusion criterion took the study's topic into account. We only included empirical articles reporting on the experiences of stepfamily members of

heterosexual and residential stepfamilies. Given our review focus, stepfamily members residing together for the majority of time was considered important. Also, because the level of gay parenthood and the level of step-parenthood may be intertwined in same-sex stepfamilies, and because we anticipated that heteronormative societal perspectives may additionally influence the doing family processes of same-sex stepfamilies (e.g. Goldberg & Allen, 2013; Robitaille & Saint-Jacques, 2009), we chose to solely include heterosexual stepfamilies to be able to focus on the level of step-parenthood only and enhance consistency in the review. Studies reporting on adult as well as child perspectives were included. That way, we were able to capture differences between children's and adults' perspectives, recognizing adults and children as equally agentic. Finally, the last inclusion criterion required the study to use qualitative data collection and data analysis methods. Given our rather experiential research question, qualitative research was assessed more capable of providing a rich description of stepfamily members' experiences of doing family (Green & Thorogood, 2004). Three screening questions were used: 'Does the article describe a qualitative data collection method (e.g. interviews, focus groups, ..)?', 'Do the researchers use a qualitative inductive data analysis method?' and 'Are there any quotes given?'. If the answer to one of these questions was negative, the article was excluded.

The evaluation of the title, the abstract, and the full text of the 1165 potentially relevant references resulted in 18 included articles. Then, two additional studies were added, one through reference chaining and one through a second database search in which a search string was used based on relevant family processes, which were named as key words in the sample of initially selected articles. Finally, 20 studies were included in the review.

Review Method

In the third phase, the 20 included articles were repeatedly read in detail to get an in-depth understanding of each study's research design, its themes, and its conclusions. Next, we

extracted these themes and interpreted them in the context of the study as a whole (Hannes & Lockwood, 2012; Noblit & Hare, 1988). In the fifth phase, broader concepts were obtained by comparing the identified themes of each article with the themes of other articles. The themes of the included studies were sufficiently similar to use the method of reciprocal translation, a process analogous to constant comparison (Hannes & Lockwood, 2012). This process of reciprocal translation was performed in alphabetical order by the authors' names, beginning with Afifi (2003) and ending with Whiting, Smith, Barnett, & Grafsky (2007). Derived key themes from the first study were compared with those of the second, and then the synthesis of these two studies was compared with the third study, and so on. The synthesis focused on stepfamily members' narratives (first-order constructs) and authors' interpretations of these narratives (second-order constructs; Noblit & Hare, 1988). In the next phase, we aimed a higher order interpretation that unites the translations into more than its parts alone imply. To create this overarching model, we listed the translated themes in a table and juxtaposed them with the final overarching themes, which can be considered as third-order constructs or our interpretations of the authors' interpretations (Hannes & Lockwood, 2012; Noblit & Hare, 1988). Finally, this synthesis is expressed in the results section below. Synthesizing the selected articles following this meta-ethnography approach implies that the synthesis is partly informed by this method and by the researcher's point of view. To increase the transparency of the interpretative work, the first author discussed all steps of the synthesis with the second author. The first author is a junior clinical psychologist pursuing a PhD in family psychology. Her research interests are how families construct their family narratives and become a family. The second author is a senior full professor in clinical psychology, mainly working from a systems theory perspective.

Results

The presented synthesis represents a view through the lens which was created by selecting our studies from the stepfamily research field the way described above. The selective sample of included qualitative articles consisted of 17 studies conducted in the United States, one in South Africa, one in Canada, and another one in New Zealand. Nine studies consisted of mixed samples with children, parents, and stepparents. Six studies solely focused on the perspective of children and five studies solely focused on the perspective of adults living in a stepfamily. The mean age of participating children ranged from 13.9 to 22.6 years, and thus children in the synthesis were mostly adolescents. Family members of both recently formed stepfamilies and established stepfamilies were represented in the included studies, as were family members of both remarried and cohabiting stepfamilies. The stepfamily members were predominantly White. Stepfathers – or children’s reports about stepfathers – were overrepresented in the included set of articles, reflecting the general trend that living with a stepfather continues to be more common than living with a stepmother (Sweeney, 2010). Sometimes, the same sample was used in two articles. This was the case for the studies of Baxter (Baxter, Braithwaite, Bryant, & Wagner, 2004; Baxter, Braithwaite, & Bryant, 2006), the studies of Braithwaite (Braithwaite, Baxter, & Harper, 1998; Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001), the study of Ganong, Coleman, Fine, & Martin (1999) and the one of Coleman, Fine, Ganong, Downs, & Pauk (2001), and the study of Golish (2003) and the one of Afifi (2003).

The synthesis of the sample of included studies led to the emergence of three family tasks related to doing family in stepfamilies: honoring the past, marking the present, and investing in the future. These tasks are by no means a chronological phasing, rather they simultaneously occur in an ongoing process of becoming a family and need constant work and attention of all stepfamily members (e.g. Braithwaite et al., 2001). Furthermore, building a stepfamily does not take place in a social vacuum but is influenced by dominant societal

perspectives. Also, an overarching dialectic was found in the narratives of stepfamily members, consisting of a tension in stepfamily members between wanting to be like a first-time family and feeling different at the same time. We will elaborate this broader context wherein stepfamilies do family first, thereafter the three family tasks will be presented.

Doing Family in Context

Stepfamilies do not develop on their own, but are constantly exposed to the influence of society and its dominant perspectives. In our Western society, the cultural ideology that the first-time family or the nuclear family – consisting of two heterosexual parents and their biological children - is the most favorable socialization situation for children is still alive (Nelson, 2006). Stepfamily members may pick up on this influence, both consciously and unconsciously, and may feel second best or inferior to this idealized family standard, causing an eagerness to seem like one. In nine studies, stepfamily members explicitly reported on wanting to be like what they describe as a “normal family” or a “real family”, and often this desire seemed to function as the driving force behind the processes of doing family (Baxter et al., 2004; Baxter et al., 2006; Braithwaite et al., 1998; Braithwaite et al., 2001; Cissna, Cox, & Bochner, 1990; Koenig Kellas, LeClair-Underberg, & Normand, 2008; Nuru & Wang, 2014; Weaver & Coleman, 2010; Whiting et al., 2007). A stepdaughter’s explanation of what shared family time did for her blended family illustrates this desire:

Closeness. Feeling as though you are a real family, not thinking of yourselves as a stepfamily. When days went well, you would feel like you were a true family, and had been for a while (Braithwaite et al., 1998, p. 110).

Big rituals, such as moving to a new place, remarriage, or the birth of a child to the new couple, often enhanced the sense of feeling like what they know as a “real” family (Coleman

et al., 2001; Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013; Nuru & Wang, 2014). As this child describes, marriage helped stepchildren feel like their family was going to be a legal family:

It was family, but not technically, not legally. He [stepfather] was an important part of our lives and we were of his. There was already that closeness factor, but that point [wedding ceremony] made it valid I guess. Now we're really going to be family (Nuru & Wang, 2014, p. 152).

Furthermore, an interesting dialectical tension appeared in the narratives of stepfamily members. At least half of the included studies in our synthesis report on stepfamily members' explicit or implicit longing to be like or feel like what they describe as a "normal" close family. However, simultaneously, the extensive effort stepfamily members undertake to build a new family often seems to obstruct this initial desire for family closeness (e.g. Baxter et al., 2004; Baxter et al., 2006; Weaver & Coleman, 2010). For instance, stepchildren idealize the sense of being a close family, and at the same time, they want the biological residential parent to function as an intermediary between themselves and the stepparent, who is considered to be an outsider (Baxter et al., 2006). Biological parents tend to express a similar dialectical tension. They aim to create their newly formed stepfamily according to the ideal of a first-time family, and at the same time, they take on a mediating role between their partner and their child(ren), being hesitant for their partner to assume a too active parenting role (Coleman et al., 2001; Weaver & Coleman, 2010). This dialectical tension appears in the statement of a 22-year old stepdaughter from a well-established stepfamily:

You shouldn't concentrate on being a 'step family' if you are there married and sharing this bond it should be just a family... I always wanted like a family... [where] you can really sit down and talk as a family, and the child will listen and respect what their mother and father have to say, but with me it's like I always had an outsider [stepfather]... (Baxter et al., 2004, p. 457).

Next, we will discuss three broad family tasks related to doing family in stepfamilies, illustrated by participants' quotes.

Honoring the Past

Although everyone is affected by past experiences and by their own family scripts when becoming a family (Byng-Hall, 1985), this impact tends to be especially present in stepfamilies. Stepfamily members bring experiences, expectations, and memories from their previous family structures. Building a new family together includes taking all stepfamily members' prior family experiences into account, hereby valuing aspects that used to be good in former family structures and finding a way to adopt these in the new stepfamily (Baxter et al., 2004; Braithwaite et al., 1998; Golish, 2003). As one 19-year-old woman notes:

So, I think, just, just attentiveness to what their separate family needs – like how they functioned before they came [to the stepfamily] and we functioned before we came into a big family. So like, just understanding what they were brought up on, like their values, and... be more understanding to that (Baxter et al., 2004, p. 460).

Such references to the importance of honoring the past were more explicit and numerous in children's narratives than in adults' narratives (Afifi, 2003; Baxter et al., 2004; Coleman et al., 2001; Dedaić, 2001; Golish, 2003; Hutchinson, Afifi, & Krause, 2007; Nuru & Wang, 2014). While (step)parents tend to focus on the new family's future and the co-construction of a new family identity, children more often experience a desire to cling to the past (Braithwaite et al., 2001). They tend to draw a boundary around the family of origin, retaining a subtle wellness from which the stepparent is excluded. They express a strong need for continuation of time alone with their residential parent, especially after a period of single parenthood when parent-child bonds were often strengthened (Baxter et al., 2004; Braithwaite et al., 1998; Coleman et al., 2001; Dedaić, 2001; Golish, 2003). However, residential parents also

recognize the importance of finding a balance between time spent together as a new family and time spent alone with their children, thereby recognizing their children's need to honor the old times (Braithwaite et al., 1998; Golish, 2003). As one mother explains:

I don't think the kids felt that Charlie [new partner] took away my attention from them. I did try really hard to stay really focused on them too, in their activities and just spending time with them... (Golish, 2003, p. 66).

Marking the Present: Allowing Differences and Looking for Similarities

Transitioning to stepfamily life involves the process of creating something new. Two subtasks emerge: confronting differences with previous family experiences or expectations on the one hand and searching for similarities among stepfamily members on the other hand.

Allowing differences.

The confrontation with differences among stepfamily members' expectations, routines, and values related to doing family and eventually finding a way to deal with these differences can be considered as one of the most demanding aspects of doing family for all stepfamily members. Two manifestations of these differences – stressors – can be recognized in stepfamily members' narratives. First, both parents and children report on experiencing loyalty conflicts, that is children “feeling caught” between their two parents or parents “feeling caught” between their children and their new partner (Afifi, 2003; Baxter et al., 2004; Coleman et al., 2001; Golish, 2003; Koenig Kellas et al., 2008; Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013; Saint-Jacques et al., 2011). The second stressor concerns the lack of clear rules and norms regarding the stepparent's role, generating role ambiguity and potentially role conflict, because of the different expectations each stepfamily member has for the stepparent (Afifi, 2003; Baxter et al., 2004; Baxter et al., 2006; Braithwaite et al., 2001; Coleman et al., 2001; Golish, 2003; Kinniburgh-White, Cartwright, & Seymour, 2010; Whiting et al., 2007).

Stepparents are challenged to find a fine balance between developing a new relationship with the child(ren), establishing a safe and trusting bond, and at the same time feeling pulled to take on a parental, disciplining role. This stepfather's description clearly articulates this struggle:

I was trying to be more of a friend to the kids instead of a father because I was afraid of the repercussions of having the kids mad at me so early in the relationship, so I think I let them get away with too much (Golish, 2003, p. 61).

This stepfather's strategy to cope with this struggle, trying to build a relationship with his stepchildren before taking on a disciplining role, is in line with previous research findings which state that parents need to retain the disciplining role until stepparents have formed a secure bond with their stepchildren (e.g. Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Ganong et al., 1999). Furthermore, these research findings also appear in the narratives of stepchildren, as the quote of this young adult about his stepfather illustrates:

(He told me off for) leaving lights on, changing the screen saver, changing the printer... leaving my bag in the hallway, leaving my shoes in the hallway, and he was like this with his children too. But it's easier to take when it's your parent (Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010, p. 896).

Children prefer that the final decision concerning discipline issues lies with the biological parent and resent their stepparents' attempts to impose rules on them (Baxter et al., 2004; Golish, 2003; Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010).

In trying to cope with these two stressors, the negotiation of family boundaries is central in stepfamily members' narratives about doing family (e.g. Braithwaite et al., 2001; Brown & Robinson, 2012; Coleman et al., 2001; Dedaić, 2001; Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010). Direct confrontation, openness, and meta-communication are commonly used

strategies, both by adults and children (Afifi, 2003; Braithwaite et al., 2001; Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013; Saint-Jacques et al., 2011; Whiting et al., 2007). One stepmother illustrates the importance of open communication to overcome possible conflicts:

We would never go to bed mad. We would talk about everything and eventually things would be fine. Good communication is the key (Whiting et al., 2007, p. 103).

Both children and adults value openness and clear communication in the family making process. However, possibly due to the influence of societal perspectives as described above, adults may long to create their stepfamily according to the ideal of a first-time family. They may attempt to prematurely (re-)install the kind of intergenerational boundary that is possible in a first-time family and attempt to communicate a unified front as a couple to the children (Afifi, 2003; Cissna et al., 1990). However, stepfamily realities, such as fundamental differences between stepparent-child and parent-child relationships, make it difficult for stepparents to assume this kind of parental role (Afifi, 2003; Coleman et al., 2001; Golish, 2003; Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010). Perhaps due to the lack of clear rules and norms regarding the stepparent's role, couples describe attempting to clarify the stepparent's role by, often unsuccessfully, trying to establish the stepparent's authority in the children's eyes.

We laid the ground rules out, he's not the dad but he's the other adult in the house, so he gets to make the rules and what he says goes (Afifi, 2003, p. 744).

However, children resist the adults' attempts to place stepparents in a position of authority and interpret it as treason of the bond between parent and child (Afifi, 2003; Baxter et al., 2004; Baxter et al., 2006; Golish, 2003). Instead, children need their parents to remain the disciplinarians in the stepfamily, until stepparents have built a strong and trusting relationship with their stepchildren. Adults may work together, engaging in "conferences" (Golish, 2003), and consulting one another before communicating final family rules; but this usually works

best if the final decisions rest with the biological parent (Golish, 2003; Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010)

Looking for similarities.

Although the road of dealing with differences and negotiating boundaries is often a rocky one, it also possibly leads to the development of feelings of solidarity, as similarities among family members may arise. Doing fun things as a family – such as going to the movies, eating out, going on shopping trips, taking vacations – and the stepparent and child(ren) spending time together without the biological parent are the most frequently mentioned strategies to learn to “feel comfortable” around each other and to cope with stress related to the transition to stepfamily life (Braithwaite et al., 1998; Coleman et al., 2001; Ganong et al., 1999; Hutchinson et al., 2007; Nuru & Wang, 2014). For example, this adolescent describes how playing soccer with his stepfather created the opportunity to get to know each other:

I would definitely say playing soccer was a big thing, cause probably last year I played with him every weekend. Just going out and kicking the ball and stuff like that. We just get talking (Hutchinson et al., 2007, p. 35).

Stepparents and children emphasize the importance of shared interests or a fit in personality characteristics to develop a connection, as these stepparent-child relationships tend to develop around mutual interests (Ganong et al., 1999; Ganong, Coleman, & Jamison, 2011; Hutchinson et al., 2007; Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010). Also, engaging in shared activities creates opportunities to communicate with each other as a family, facilitating the necessary openness to successfully negotiate boundaries and deal with differences (Hutchinson et al., 2007; Nuru & Wang, 2014; Whiting et al., 2007).

Investing in the Future: To Feel Like a Family

Building a new family together cannot be seen as a single transition, but involves an ongoing continuous process of maintaining and strengthening the family relationships (Braithwaite et al., 2001; Ganong et al., 2011). What is central in the narratives of stepfamily members is that no big gestures are needed to feel like a family (Baxter et al., 2004; Brown & Robinson, 2012; Ganong et al., 1999; Ganong et al., 2011; Golish, 2003; Hutchinson et al., 2007; Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010; Nuru & Wang, 2014). Small things, such as having a cup of coffee together (Brown & Robinson, 2012), everyday talk (Golish, 2003), or humor (Ganong et al., 1999; Golish, 2003; Hutchinson et al., 2007) foster family bonds and cohesiveness. Also, activities of daily living, such as doing chores and eating meals together, were important family activities creating a sense of belonging for all stepfamily members (Hutchinson et al., 2007). Although engaging in mutually enjoyable leisure activities with the whole family is also mentioned to enhance the family bond (Brown & Robinson, 2012; Coleman et al., 2001; Ganong et al., 1999), it seems that the real magic of feeling like a family lies in the ordinary, everyday family activities. This stepdaughter tries to explain her appreciation of her stepfather's prosocial actions:

Little things like that; it wasn't really anything he said but it was the action that he did (Baxter et al., 2004, p. 458).

The development of interpersonal mattering seems to be an essential process in family making (Braithwaite et al., 1998; Ganong et al., 1999; Ganong et al., 2011; Hutchinson et al., 2007; Nuru & Wang, 2014). Especially in the stepparent-child relationship, children care that stepparents show interest in them by attending their sport events, helping them with homework, providing emotional or practical support, etc. (Ganong et al., 1999; Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010). Again, children do not expect big gestures of their stepparents, instead the expression "being there" is frequently used (Ganong et al., 2011). As one young man says about the received support of his stepfather:

I had a race last year and it was really good having him there... He helped me out a lot, did a lot of things that made it easier for me. He makes a lot of sacrifices to help with things. I guess I respect him for doing that (Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010, p. 895).

This quote demonstrates that the development of feelings of mattering among stepfamily members can be understood as a reciprocal process: the more children perceive that they are special to their stepparent, thus that they matter to their stepparent, the more they communicate closeness and demonstrate care for the stepparent (Ganong et al., 1999; Ganong et al., 2011; Hutchinson et al., 2007; Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010; Koenig Kellas et al., 2008). Whereas children in stepfamilies deduce feelings of mattering from the engagement of their (step)parents in shared activities and prosocial actions, stepparents tend to attach more value to evidence of (public) acceptance by their stepchildren and a sense of belonging in the family unit (Hutchinson et al., 2014; Koenig Kellas et al., 2008; Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013; Whiting et al., 2007). This stepfather underscores the importance of his stepson's public acknowledgment of their relationship to his feelings of mattering:

We had a [school basketball] banquet and [the students were required to] introduce their parents... I felt a lump in my throat. He is standing there with all his friends and his dad and he's fine introducing me. He's proud of the fact that I have been involved with him. And that was a real big thing (Hutchinson et al., 2007, p. 34).

Discussion

This review's most innovative finding concerns stepfamily members' experience of a dialectical tension between wanting to be what they know as a "normal" family and feeling the differences of their family structure. Also, the importance of shared activities for the development of interpersonal mattering in stepfamilies and the understanding that no big

gestures are needed to feel like a family are distinctive in this synthesis. Although a developmental trend towards more mutual entanglement of stepfamily members may hide in the representation of doing family by three family tasks, we emphasize that the presented structure does not aim to reflect an evolution towards the nuclear first-time family type. Even though stepfamily members in our synthesis tend to pursue being like a first-time family (e.g. Baxter et al., 2006), their narratives also reveal two unique stepfamily characteristics related to the various types of kinship present in stepfamilies.

First, biological parents tend to take on a leading role in the process of co-constructing a new family identity and thus function as the driving forces behind doing family in stepfamilies (e.g. Weaver & Coleman, 2010). They often attempt to facilitate interactions between their new partners and their children by functioning as a mediator (Baxter et al., 2006; Coleman et al., 2001; Weaver & Coleman, 2010). Although they experience many burdens related to this role as a go-between, for example feeling caught in the middle between their partner and their children (Afifi, 2003), biological parents, especially mothers, initially want to maintain control over discipline and also believe that they are responsible for creating the best possible family environment for their children (Coleman et al., 2001; Martin-Uzzi & Duval-Tsioles, 2013; Weaver & Coleman, 2010). This finding is consistent with Nelson's (2006) conclusion that single mothers tend to maintain some parenting activities for themselves. However, these activities are not related to domains such as affection or love, compatible with our finding that biological parents are often the ones to promote a positive stepparent-child relationship by encouraging stepparents and children to do things together or by helping them understand each other (Coleman et al., 2001; Ganong et al., 2011). Instead, it is about discipline, "about being the one with the power to say no" (Nelson, 2006, p. 793). The combination of an intense shared history and a guaranteed continuing future seems to distinctively characterize the parent-child relationship (Kuczynski & De Mol, 2015). These

peculiar features may create the uniquely safe environment necessary to perform, negotiate, and accept discipline, as both parents and children prefer that the final decision concerning discipline issues rests within the parent-child relationship (Baxter et al., 2006; Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010). However, at the same time, both parents and children express a strong desire to feel like a first-time family. The adults may be longing to try to communicate a unified front and both may wish, or believe, that stepparents could wield more authority in stepparent-child relationships than is possible or wise; and the children wish to feel comfortable and “at home”.

This is where the aforementioned dialectical tension appears. The theoretical framework of relational dialectics (Baxter, 2004) is based on the ideas of dialogism by the Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin (1981). Central to dialectics is the concept of contradiction, referring to people’s experiences of simultaneously opposing tensions in their relationships. Relational dialectical processes have been studied by family researchers (e.g. De Mol, Lemmens, Verhofstadt, & Kuczynski, 2013), and even in the context of stepfamilies (e.g. Baxter et al., 2004; Braithwaite, Toller, Daas, Durham, & Jones, 2008). However, the dialectical tension identified in our synthesis seems to be different. In line with Wyverkens, Van Parys, & Buysse (2015), we identified a dialectical tension related to the societal perspectives about families. Stepfamily members compare themselves to the cultural ideal of the first-time family, wanting to be like one, but at the same time confronted with the distinctiveness of biological ties and the incomplete institutionalization of step-relationships (Cherlin, 1978), which makes them inherently different from the first-time family. Thus, stepfamily members’ dialectical experiences appear to be understandable as a pull between the perceived “normalcy” of a first-time family and difference, influenced by current societal perspectives about family life.

Two important notes should be made in light of this conclusion. First, previous research has convincingly demonstrated that biological parents should retain control over discipline issues until stepparents and stepchildren have built a satisfying relationship. In the first stages of stepfamily life, stepparents should concentrate on developing a trusting and caring foundation upon which authority can later be built (e.g. Coleman et al., 2000; Ganong et al., 1999; Schrodt, 2016). Early discipline by stepparents is detrimental to the stepparent-stepchild relationship, and particularly an authoritarian parenting style is toxic to the development of this relationship (Bray, 1999; Claxton-Oldfield, Garber, & Gillcrisp, 2006; Coleman et al., 2000; Kinniburgh-White et al., 2010). It seems that what works in terms of the stepparent's disciplinary role requires actualizing one side of the dialectic (biological parents wanting to maintain control over discipline issues) and letting go of the other (wanting to be like a first-time family). However, despite previous research's convincing evidence in favor of actualizing one side of the dialectic, our results suggest that stepfamily members are struggling with both sides of this dialectical tension. Stepparents may feel pulled to take on a parental role, however, this seems to be a role that, as previous research demonstrates, stepparents cannot succeed in until they have built a relationship with their stepchildren and developed a mutual sense of interpersonal mattering. Second, because of the overrepresentation of stepfather families in our included studies, generalizing this findings to biological fathers in stepmother families should be treated with some caution. It remains unclear whether the finding that biological parents take on a central role in doing family is mainly due to the biological relatedness or rather to the dominant societal perspectives considering mothers as responsible kin keepers (Weaver & Coleman, 2010; Whiting et al., 2007). Future research should address this issue by studying stepfamilies consisting of stepmothers and biological fathers.

The second characterizing dynamic in stepfamilies concerns the step-relationship. Stepparents and children engaging in shared activities was a frequently mentioned family process in narratives of stepfamily members (e.g. Braithwaite et al., 1998; Ganong et al., 1999; Hutchinson et al., 2007). Given that most children in our review were adolescents, this finding is noteworthy because of the repeatedly demonstrated evidence that shared family time tends to decline as children become adolescents and that family researchers consider it to be a more typical family process during earlier stages of the family life cycle (Crosnoe & Trinitapoli, 2008; Larson, Richards, Moneta, Holmbeck, & Duckett, 1996). Family processes in stepfamilies and first-time families can be assumed to not inherently differ in nature but rather in terms of timing: starting later but unfolding faster. Further research is needed to validate this hypothesis. Anyhow, our synthesis illustrates that stepparents and adolescents spending quality time together serves two basic goals: getting to know each other and facilitating bonding between stepparents and children (Ganong et al., 1999; Hutchinson et al., 2007; Nuru & Wang, 2014). This finding is in line with quantitative stepfamily research by validating shared activities as a way to build and develop positive step-relationships (e.g. Baxter, Braithwaite, & Nicholson, 1999; Schrodt, Soliz, & Braithwaite, 2008). Moreover, our findings contribute to current stepfamily research by demonstrating that shared activities and everyday talk are not only a way for stepparents to build a relationship with their stepchildren, but also serve a more profound function. The fact that the stepparent invests time and energy in undertaking mutually enjoyable activities with the youngster gives the latter the feeling that he or she matters. Interpersonal mattering, the feeling that one is significant to someone else (Marshall, 2001), is an essential part of close family relationships and is positively associated with psychological wellbeing (Dixon, Scheidegger, & McWhirter, 2009; Marshall, 2001). Also, this development of interpersonal mattering in the stepparent-child relationship, and thus the development of a secure bond between stepparent and child, may be understood as a

necessary phase before stepparents can become disciplinarians. However, the development of interpersonal mattering within stepfamilies seems to be an understudied topic and merits further exploration in future stepfamily research.

Although our current review provides new insight into stepfamilies doing family, some limitations need to be addressed. After analyzing the experiences of stepfamily members in detail, we proposed three strongly intertwined family tasks. However, we are aware that the presented framework is only one way of synthesizing the included studies and that this synthesis has been informed by the method of meta-ethnography and the social constructionist perspective on which the review question was based. Frequent and reflexive discussions between the authors helped to strengthen this representation of the findings. Second, in line with Littell, Corcoran, and Pillai (2008), capturing the full spectrum of studies relevant to the research question is often not fully achievable. Our synthesis is not immune to this limitation. By searching multiple databases, we tried to overcome this limitation as well as possible. However, due to the qualitative focus of this review, a lot of relevant quantitative studies of stepfamilies were excluded. Also, our theoretical framework of doing family and the inclusion criteria which were based on this framework proved to be a useful way of *seeing* stepfamilies' experiences, but at the same time, this theoretical premise was also a way of *not seeing* their experiences, and led to a rather selective group of included studies. Finally, as Weigel (2008) points out, scholars' views of family may not fully agree with those of laypeople. Similarly, a disconnect may be recognized between the review's premise that families are completely malleable and the resulting freedom family members have in co-constructing their family on the one hand, and the stepfamily members' actual lived experiences of wanting to be like a first-time family on the other hand. This discrepancy suggests that the current societal perspectives on family powerfully affect the way stepfamily members in our studies do family and present their family to the outside world.

Despite these limitations, our review provides additional insight for family therapists. The results demonstrate the importance of taking into account the whole stepfamily and its context, advocating for a systemic approach in stepfamily research and therapy. Family therapists could support stepfamilies by facilitating the family tasks described above. For example, they could help stepfamily members express experiences, expectations, and rituals from previous family structures to each other so that each family member is able to sufficiently honor the past. Also, family therapists could help stepfamily members negotiate new family boundaries and family roles by promoting beneficial family processes, such as openness, meta-communication, and shared activities. Finally, and most importantly, our results suggest that family therapists should acknowledge stepfamily members' struggle between wanting to be like a first-time family and feeling different at the same time, even though the existence of evidence-based guidelines in favor of actualizing one side of this struggle. Family therapists could help stepfamily members cope with this struggle by respecting stepfamily members' desire to be like a first-time family, while at the same time gradually releasing them from the belief that they have to be like this first-time family in order to feel like a family. Also, emphasizing that stepfamily members' experiences may be the result of their stepfamily structure, characterized by pre-existing strong parent-child relationships and new slowly-developing stepparent-child relationships, could help stepfamilies "do family".

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