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Who is in the Stepfamily? Change in Stepparents' Family Boundaries between 1992-2009

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Review

Who is in the Stepfamily?

Change in Stepparents' Family Boundaries between 1992-2009

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STEPPARENTS' FAMILY BOUNDARIES 2

Abstract

Guided by trends of increased prevalence and social acceptance of stepfamilies, we argue that stepparents' are more likely to include stepchildren in their personal network in recent times. Data are from observations by two studies, i.e. Living Arrangements and Social Networks of Older Adults, and Longitudinal Aging Study Amsterdam in 1992-2009 of 247 Dutch stepparents aged 54-91 years. Results revealed that in 1992 63% of the stepparents had stepchildren in their personal network, and this percentage increased to 85% in 2009. The network membership of stepchildren is less likely for stepparents from living-apart-together partnerships. Stepmothers less often included stepchildren in their personal network than stepfathers. Both effects may be understood in terms of family commitment. Stepfamily boundaries have become more 'permeable' over time, suggesting that there is an increased potential for support exchange and caregiving within stepfamilies.

Key words: Families in middle and later life < Adult Development and Aging; Intergenerational relations < Intergenerational; Social trends/social change < Demography; Sociohistorical change < Social Context; Stepfamilies < Family Structure

Who is in the Stepfamily?

Change in Stepparents' Family Boundaries between 1992-2009

The vast increase in divorce and diverse marital and partnership transitions is one of the main demographic changes in western societies over the last decades (Amato & James, 2010; Cherlin, 2010). Like most other modern industrialized societies, the Netherlands has witnessed a strong increase in divorce rates in the 1960's and 1970's after which the trend stabilized or even reversed slightly (Latten, 2004). Remarriage rates have decreased since 1970 in the Netherlands for divorced and widowed individuals, but these were often replaced by cohabiting or living apart together relationships. As a result of diverse marital and partnership transitions, families with stepchildren are making up an increasingly larger proportion of the population (Teachman & Tedrow, 2008). Particularly stepfamilies have been found to generate uncertainty with regard to the boundaries of families (Furstenberg, 1987). The elevated levels of uncertainty in stepfamilies on who is part of the family network and who is not can be understood from the lack of clear social roles and responsibilities in these families (Cherlin, 1978). Understanding the functioning of stepfamilies, and in particular relationships between older parent and their adult stepchildren, is vital to appraise future viability of stepfamilies in providing care to older adults.

In this study, we argue that socio-cultural changes in the second half of the twentieth century have increased the inclusion of stepchildren as a regular and important tie in the networks of stepparents. A loss of constraints and embeddedness provided by traditional social structures and communities, such as the family, church and neighborhood, can be observed. This process has been described as 'de-traditionalization' (Giddens, 1990). New patterns of partnership and family structure have developed, encompassing next to an increase in divorce and remarriage rates also a rise in cohabitation and living-apart-together relationships (Cherlin,

STEPPARENTS' FAMILY BOUNDARIES 4

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3 2010). At the same time, the social acceptance of more diverse family behavior has increased
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5 (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). In a situation in which stepfamilies become more common
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7 and more socially accepted, it is more likely that stepchildren will be included in the stepparents'
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9 family network.
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12 The purpose of this study is twofold: (1) to examine the extent to which stepfamily
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14 boundaries have changed over time, and (2) to explore the factors associated with stepfamily
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16 boundaries. Specifically we will focus on whether older stepparents include their stepchildren in
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18 their personal network, i.e., whether older stepparents consider stepchildren as significant others
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20 with whom support might be exchanged (Kahn & Antonucci, 1981). The boundaries of the
21
22 family network are a matter of perspective and are defined by the individual within the
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24 stepfamily (Schmeeckle, Giarrusso, Feng & Bengtson, 2006). Each family member may have a
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26 very different network of kin (Cherlin, 1978) depending on conditions such as common
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28 residence (De Jong Gierveld, 2004) or duration and quality of the relationship (Ganong &
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30 Coleman, 2006). This study aims to more systematically address the stepparent's definition of
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32 who is within the stepfamily.
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39 We address our research questions on the basis of a sample of Dutch older stepparents.
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41 The Netherlands is a fairly typical example of a (late) modernized and industrialized country.
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43 Divorce rates have been at an intermediate level in the Netherlands and have been higher in the
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45 United States (Blossfeld & Muller, 2002; De Graaf & Kalmijn, 2006). In both countries, the
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47 increase in rates of divorce was concentrated primarily in the 1960's and 1970's and stabilized or
48
49 even reversed slightly after that (Cherlin, 2010; Latten, 2004). Despite this, there are indications
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51 that this trend is different for those above the age of 50, as this group is more likely to have
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53 experienced divorce over the last two decades in the United States (Brown & Fen-Lin, 2012).
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3 Remarriage rates in the Netherlands have also been somewhat lower than in the United States
4 (Statistics Netherlands, 1999; Bumpass, Sweet & Castro Martin, 1990). In the Netherlands,
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6 cohabitation and living-apart together relationships are more commonplace than in the United
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8 States, not only as second union but also as first union. Attitudes towards non-traditional family
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10 behavior (e.g. divorce, remarriage, gender equality, pre-marital sexuality) have become more
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12 tolerant in both countries (Kraaykamp, 2002; The Netherlands Institute for Social Research,
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14 1994; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). A survey on value change in the 1990's showed that
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16 on average, the Dutch were among those with the least traditional value orientations, also when
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18 they are compared to Americans (Inglehart & Baker, 2000).
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24 Family network boundaries 25

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27 Family boundaries have widely been used to study the effects of family membership
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29 change on individual and family functioning (Caroll, Olson & Buckmiller, 2007). The idea of
30
31 family boundaries is based on the family systems theory that perceives the family as a system
32
33 composed of various subsystems that allow different members to carry out their roles and
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35 functions (Walker & Messinger, 1979). Family boundaries can contribute to a sense of identity
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37 that differentiates one group from another (Walker & Messinger, 1979). An important issue in the
38
39 definition of family boundaries is the meaning that individuals give to their family in response to
40
41 changes within the family, like births and marriages (Boss, 1980). Becoming part of a stepfamily
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43 is likely to make family boundaries more uncertain and more permeable, as the roles and norms
44
45 are less clear than in first-marriage biological families (Cherlin, 2004). In stepfamilies more than
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47 in biological families, familial roles are 'achieved' rather than 'ascribed' (Walker & Messinger,
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49 1979). Stewart (2005) observed that family boundaries are more uncertain when two parents
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51 bring in children from earlier unions (complex stepfamilies) than when one parent brought in a
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STEPPARENTS' FAMILY BOUNDARIES 6

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3 child from a former union (simple stepfamilies). In addition, there is more uncertainty of the
4 family boundaries when adult children did not reside with their stepparent (Pasley, 1987).

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8 Clearly, family boundaries depend on the complexity of the family structure and a history of co-
9 residence. As stepfamilies have more permeable boundaries than nuclear families, in this study,
10 we perceive the family as a network in which stepchildren can be included on the basis of their
11 perceived importance. In other words, we propose that not the structural position of the stepchild
12 as such matters for assessing future care giving potential of families, but whether or not the
13 stepchild and stepparent perceive each other as part of the family network.
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22 Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

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24 Are stepfamilies still 'incomplete institutions'?

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27 As argued in the introduction, our study departs from the notion that socio-cultural
28 changes in the last century are likely to have increased the inclusion of stepchildren by
29 stepparents in the family network. During the first half of the twentieth century, individuals were
30 strongly embedded in more traditional social communities (Giddens, 1990). Institutions such as
31 families, political institutions, and churches played a large role in protecting and constraining
32 individuals. In the 1950's, boundaries were predominantly constructed around the 'nuclear'
33 family consisting of two-parent families with only biological children (Parsons & Bales, 1955).
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37 The home was considered the major arena of family life. There was a sharp gender-based
38 division of labor with men as the main breadwinner and women mainly responsible for the
39 household and child rearing. This type of family became the cultural ideal and was seen as
40 standard (Smith, 1993). During the 1950's, the proportion of children that grew up in a two-
41 parent biological family was higher than ever before in history, making this a period of
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3 In a situation that emphasized the importance of two-parent biological families, it is
4 likely that stepchildren were not included in the personal networks of stepparents. Stepchildren
5 did not fit in the cultural ideal of what a family was. Cherlin (1978) has termed remarriages that
6 existed in and before the 1970's as 'incomplete institutions', resulting from a lack of normative
7 guidelines about conduct in higher order marriages and the lack of adequate social and legal
8 support for step families in those era's. In line with this view, obligations to support older parents
9 are weaker when parents are not biologically related (Ganong & Coleman, 2006). Additionally,
10 Pezzin, Pollak, and Steinberg Schone (2008) showed that parents with stepchildren in the family
11 were indeed less likely to receive cash and time transfers and were less likely to live with their
12 stepchild.
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26 From the 1970's onwards, personal relationships have become less socially rooted and
27 more fluid than before (Allan, 2001). Individuals became more in charge of the management of
28 their own personal relations, also with regard to step-relationships (Sweeney, 2010). Already in
29 his 1978 article, Cherlin hypothesized that over time stepfamilies would become more accepted.
30 He suggested that norms and guidelines on how to behave within stepfamilies in everyday life as
31 well as solve problems specific to these family types were likely to develop. The increased
32 personal autonomy in relationships imply that content and emotional importance of relationships
33 are less tied to structural family positions and roles than in earlier times, and more to individual
34 needs and preferences. Additionally, like stated in the introduction, these developments coincided
35 with a trend towards more tolerant attitudes concerning diverse family behavior (Kraaykamp,
36 2002; The Netherlands Institute for Social Research, 1994; Schmeekle et al., 2006; Thornton &
37 Young-DeMarco, 2001). Cooney and Dunne (2001) argued that people are increasingly adjusting
38 to marital patterns that involve remarriage, especially after divorce. Schmeekle et al. (2006)
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STEPPARENTS' FAMILY BOUNDARIES 8

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3 observed that about four fifth of adult children perceived current stepparents to be full or partial
4 family members, and about half perceived them a little, quite a bit or fully as parent. Children of
5 divorced parents may attach less importance to inheritance and parental loyalties and will be
6 more supportive of parental remarriage.
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12 We propose that because stepfamilies have become more common and therefore possibly
13 also more 'normal,' people might be more equipped to deal with complex family structures than
14 before. The increased tolerance and awareness of diverse family forms may affect how parents
15 experience remarriage and their relationship with stepchildren. These developments may lead to
16 increased likelihood of inclusion of stepchildren in the family network. For this study we have
17 data available on network membership from 1992 to 2009. We expect that the older stepparents'
18 network membership of stepchildren has increased over this period of time (Hypothesis 1).
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29 Stepfamily boundaries and family commitment

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31 The concept of family commitment is relevant to the understanding of stepfamily
32 boundaries. Very little is known about the commitment between (step)parents and (step)children
33 (Allan, Hawker & Crow, 2001). A family member's commitment is dependent on future
34 likelihood of continuing family relationships and the process of uncertainty reduction (Downs,
35 2004). These aspects of commitment may be affected by the duration of the relationship and
36 physical closeness.
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45 The duration of the step-relationship is related to the moment when the stepfamily was
46 formed, either earlier in the parental life course when children are of minor age, or later in the
47 parental life course when children are adults (Ganong & Coleman, 2004; Marsiglio, 1992;
48 Schmeeckle et al., 2006). We expect that in the stepfamilies where the stepchildren entered as a
49 minor, stepparents will more often include the stepchildren in the personal network in
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3 comparison to those stepfamilies where the stepchildren entered as an adult (Hypothesis 2).
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5 Stepfamilies might be formed after remarriage or other forms of partnering in later life.
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8 Nowadays it is not obvious that these new partnerships may also lead to co-residence. Older
9
10 people might opt for starting a living-apart-together partnership motivated to continue their
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12 social and family relationships like before (De Jong Gierveld, 2004). Frequency of contact with
13
14 stepchildren is affected by whether the partners live in the same household. Stepfamilies might
15
16 include a situation where stepchildren have never been part of the household of the stepparent,
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18 and stepchildren visit the biological parent without being in contact with the non-co-residing
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20 stepparent. Cohabitation between partners is associated with lower levels of commitment than
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22 marriage (Poortman & Mills, 2012) and greater ambiguity in social roles (Brown & Manning,
23
24 2009; Stewart, 2005). Although an earlier study has shown that cohabiting stepparents perceived
25
26 less contact with stepchildren than married stepparents (Van der Pas & Van Tilburg, 2010), no
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28 prior studies have been conducted on non-residential stepfamilies, i.e., step-relationships based
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30 on a living-apart-together partnership. One can reasonably expect that commitment and clarity
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32 regarding roles is lower if the partner who brought in the stepchildren does not live in the
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34 household and this may have an effect on whether or not the stepchild is seen as part of the
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36 family network. We therefore expect that within residential stepfamilies, stepparents will more
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38 often include the stepchildren in the personal network than within non-residential stepfamilies
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40 (Hypothesis 3).
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48 The role of gender
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50 Prior research has shown that the gender of the parent is relevant in stepfamily
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52 relationships (Kalmijn, 2007; Schmeckle, 2007; Van der Pas & Van Tilburg, 2010). Fathers who
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54 have divorced, widowed or remarried have less contact and receive less support from their
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STEPPARENTS' FAMILY BOUNDARIES 10

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3 biological children in comparison to mothers. The effect can be explained by the reduced
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5 investments that fathers have in their children if they have left the household at an early age. The
6
7 impact of custody arrangements also leaves less opportunity for the non-custodial parent, who is
8
9 still often the father, to see their biological children (Seltzer, 1991).
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13 Often kin relationships and childrearing are managed largely by women (Cooney &
14
15 Dunne, 2001; Rosenthal, 1985). This kin keeper role might lead to a sharper division among
16
17 women between who is family and who is not, and to favoring biological kin over step kin.
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19 Particularly the stepmother-stepchild relationship has been identified as the most problematic
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21 step-relationship (Ihinger-Tallman & Pasley, 2008). This is more so if the stepchild has lived
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23 with the stepmother. However, stepmothers can also be seen as significant kin keepers, possibly
24
25 putting a great deal of energy into developing contact and closeness with their minor-age and
26
27 adult stepchildren. In a study on gender dynamics in stepfamilies, Schmeckle (2007) observed
28
29 that stepmothers are likely to be more involved with their biological children than stepfathers,
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31 increasing the possibility of competition and conflict with the biological mother. Stepfathers in
32
33 contrast have been noted to parent the children with whom they live. On the basis of these
34
35 results, it can be expected that stepmothers will have less commitment towards stepchildren than
36
37 stepfathers. In summary, we hypothesize that stepmothers will less often include their
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39 stepchildren in the personal network than stepfathers (Hypothesis 4).
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45 Other variables

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47
48 Various aspects of family structure and parental characteristics are also relevant. Age
49
50 captures generational variation and age-related differences such as in the domain of physical
51
52 capacities. The parent's educational level might be related to relational competence and abilities
53
54 to handle complex situations. Stepchildren's status might be related to the number of family
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3 members and the number of relationships in the personal network. Gender composition describes
4
5 the availability of stepdaughters and stepsons.
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7 8 Measuring the boundaries of family networks 9

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11 As noted before, one of the main aspects of family boundaries is the meaning that is
12
13 given to specific relationships. In our study, we view the family from a network perspective and
14
15 look at whether stepparents name their stepchildren as an important tie with whom they maintain
16
17 regular contact. Over the life course, the network membership of stepchildren can change,
18
19 resulting in a shift of the boundaries of the family network as experienced by the stepparent. If
20
21 stepparents identify their stepchildren as a tie with whom there is important and regular contact,
22
23 we view the stepchild as part of the family network. Stepchildren identified by the parent as an
24
25 important tie might be available for care giving. On the other hand, if stepchildren are not
26
27 identified in the network, it shows that step-relationships are not salient and these stepchildren
28
29 are most likely not available as care-givers. This network-based approach differs from previous
30
31 studies, in which family boundaries in stepfamilies have often been assessed by studying
32
33 boundary ambiguity at the couple level (Boss & Greenberg, 1984; Furstenberg, 1987; Pasley,
34
35 1987; Schmeeckle et al., 2006; Stewart, 2005). In these studies, inconsistency in partner's reports
36
37 on who is member of the household or who is member of the family is studied. Rather than
38
39 studying the inconsistency in reports of children between parents in the same family, we study
40
41 the family network as perceived by the stepparent. As such, we can determine whether
42
43 stepparents are more or less likely to include stepchildren in 2009 than in 1992 and which factors
44
45 are associated with including stepchildren in the family network.
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52 53 Method 54

55 Respondents 56 57 58 59 60

STEPPARENTS' FAMILY BOUNDARIES 12

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4 We employ data from the research program Living Arrangements and Social Networks of
5
6 Older Adults conducted in 1992 in the Netherlands (Knipscheer, De Jong Gierveld, Van Tilburg
7
8 & Dykstra, 1995). A nationally representative random sample of 4,494 Dutch older adults born
9
10 between 1903 and 1937 is used, with an overrepresentation of older men at baseline. The sample
11
12 is stratified by age and gender. The cooperation rate was 62%. The sample was drawn from the
13
14 population registers of 11 Dutch municipalities that differ with regard to urbanization and
15
16 religion. Follow-ups among respondents born in 1908 or later were conducted by the
17
18 Longitudinal Aging Study Amsterdam (LASA; Huisman et al., 2011) in 1992-1993 ($N = 3,107$),
19
20 1995-1996 ($N = 2,545$), 1998-1999 ($N = 2,076$), 2001-2002 ($N = 1,691$), 2005-2006 ($N = 1,257$)
21
22 and 2008-2009 ($N = 835$). In 2002-2003, a new sample was taken in the context of LASA (born
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24 in 1938-1947; $N = 1,002$) following the same sampling frame as the earlier cohorts with a
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26 cooperation rate of 62%. Follow-ups were carried out in 2005-2006 ($N = 908$) and 2008-2009 (N
27
28 = 833). Across the follow-up observations 82% of the respondents was re-interviewed, 11% had
29
30 died at each follow-up, 2% was too ill or too cognitively impaired to be interviewed, 5% refused
31
32 to be re-interviewed, and less than 1% could not be contacted due to a residential relocation to
33
34 another country or an unknown destination. The two datasets ($N = 5,496$) were combined into
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36 one dataset including seven observations at a maximum, with the first observation (for
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38 respondents born between 1903 and 1937) held in 1992, the fifth observation in 2001-2003
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40 (including the baseline observation for respondents born between 1938 and 1947), and the last
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42 observation in 2008-2009.

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51 Table 1 provides the composition of our sample across observations. The composition
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53 was the result of several inclusion strategies of stepchild-stepparent relationships. At baseline (in
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55 1992 or in 2002-2003) identification of children followed a two-step procedure. Initially, the
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3 number of children was assessed by means of the question: "How many children do you have or
4 have you had? You should consider not only the children whose natural mother (father) you are,
5 but also stepchildren and adoptive children." Subsequently, data were collected for each child in
6 the demographic part of the interview: name and gender; whether the child was a biological
7 child, stepchild, or adoptive child; and whether the child was deceased. From this demographic
8 part of the interview, it was assessed whether the respondent was in a stepfamily. Additionally,
9 interviewers were instructed to note whether respondents reported having stepchildren at any
10 other moment in the interview. At the follow-up observations in 2001-2002 and 2005-2006 the
11 parental status of respondents was also assessed. Names of the children reported at earlier
12 observations were presented, followed by questions to identify additional children. In the
13 network part of each interview, we assessed whether the stepchild is part of the family network
14 by asking the respondent to name the children that are important and with whom there is regular
15 contact. In case a stepchild was identified that was not previously reported, the stepparental
16 status was corrected in the interview. We applied backwards correction if a stepparent (in the
17 demographic or network part) only named a stepchild at a later observation, as we determined
18 whether the particular partnership in which the stepchild is embedded existed at an earlier
19 observation. In these cases we coded the dependent variable as the stepchild not being in the
20 network at the earlier observation.

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46 Of the 5,496 respondents, we excluded 255 respondents for whom we had no data on the
47 existence of children or on characteristics of children due to shortened or broken off interviews
48 because of frailty or other reasons, and 4,921 respondents who did not have stepchildren.
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51 Furthermore, stepparents were excluded because the stepchildren were from a previous
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partnership ($n = 71$; in 7 cases there was a new partnership), all stepchildren were adolescent (n

STEPPARENTS' FAMILY BOUNDARIES 14

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3 = 1) or information on the personal network was incomplete ($n = 1$). In total, our analyses
4
5 pertained to 247 stepparents (152 men and 95 women). As outlined in Table 1, most stepparents
6
7 were included at the baseline observation among earlier birth cohorts in 1992 ($n = 134$) or among
8
9 later birth cohorts in 2002-2003 ($n = 71$) when these birth cohorts were interviewed for the first
10
11 time. For 33 (25%; $n = 134$) and 11 (15%; $n = 71$) respondents, respectively, the respondent
12
13 mentioned children of the partner at a follow-up observation, i.e., at baseline they were
14
15 stepparent and they reported the partnership but not the stepchildren. There were an additional 42
16
17 respondents who were included after baseline because they became stepparent in the course of
18
19 the study.
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25 In total there were 703 observations ($M = 3.9$) available for the 247 respondents. For 89
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27 respondents (36%; $N = 247$) all follow-up observations were available including the 2008-2009
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29 observation. Forty-one respondents (17%) died, resulting in fewer follow-up observations. We
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31 excluded 49 (20%) respondents from follow-up observations because their partnership ended, for
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33 example by death of the parent of the stepchildren. We missed follow-up observations from 26
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35 respondents (11%) who refused to be interviewed, from 12 (5%) respondents ineligible to
36
37 cooperate, from 23 respondents (9%) due to a shortened or broken off interview, and from 7
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39 respondents (3%) born in 1907 or earlier included in the 1992-interview because follow-up
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41 observations were not performed for respondents born in these years. Results of multivariate
42
43 logistic regression analysis showed that respondents for whom we missed follow-up data ($n =$
44
45 68) when compared with respondents with all follow-up data, who died or who were not
46
47 stepparent anymore ($n = 179$) were more often men (odds ratio, $OR = 2.14$, $df = 1$, $Wald = 5.3$, p
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49 $< .05$). Age ($df = 1$, $Wald = 1.0$), partner status ($df = 2$, $Wald = 2.8$) and whether the stepparent
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STEPPARENTS' FAMILY BOUNDARIES 16

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3 observations (not displayed).
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5 [Insert Table 2 about here]
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8 Measurements
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10 *Family network membership.* To obtain adequate information on their networks,
11 respondents were asked to identify their personal network members using the domain-contact
12 method (Van Tilburg, 1998). Network members were identified in seven domains: household
13 members, children and their partners, other relatives, neighbors, colleagues from work or school,
14 fellow members of organizations, and others (e.g., friends and acquaintances). For children, the
15 following question was asked: "We would like to know with which children you have regular
16 contact and who are also important to you." All network members were identified individually
17 by name. Because we were interested in stepparents' boundaries of the family network we
18 assessed whether one or more versus none stepchildren were identified as a network member.
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31 *Partnership status and stepfamily formation.* Partner and marital status were assessed on
32 the basis of various interview questions and using register data. We differentiated between
33 respondents who were married, living with a partner and living-apart-together. We also assessed
34 the duration of the partnership by subtracting the date of relationship initiation from the date of
35 the interview. The procedure to outline the stepfamily formation has been described above. Of
36 each individual child we asked various questions including their age. By combining the age of
37 stepchildren at the time of the interview and the year the partnership was established, we
38 assessed whether stepchildren were of adolescent or younger, minor age or adult at that time. In
39 all observations where there was a living-apart-together partnership, this relationship was
40 established when stepchildren were adults. There were two respondents currently living-apart-
41 together who had co-resided before and established the partnership when stepchildren were
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5 *Control variables.* We included age of the older parent at the time of the interview to
6 control for age-related developments in our dependent variable. We also included the number of
7 other relatives and of non-kin in the personal network. The level of education of the respondent
8 was measured in numbers of years of completed education, and varied from 5 (less than primary
9 school) to 18 (college or university). The number of biological and stepchildren alive was
10 counted at each observation by asking respondents if any children were deceased. Gender
11 composition describes the availability of stepdaughters and stepsons.
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22 Procedure

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24 The data were hierarchically structured, with observations (Level 1) nested within
25 stepparents (Level 2). The study is based on longitudinal data in which observations of the same
26 respondents across these observations are interrelated, however, our focus is not on trajectories
27 of change of stepparent-stepchild relationships but on the effect of the year of observation (1992
28 to 2009). Although we take into account two variables that give an indication of these
29 trajectories, namely age and partnership duration, these are merely included as control variables.
30 The correlation between age at the interview and year is small ($r = -.06$). To accommodate the
31 design with observations nested in respondents we conducted multilevel logistic regression
32 analysis by which differences between stepparents and dependence of the observations within
33 stepparents are captured in separate error terms. An advantage of multilevel regression analyses
34 for our sample with different moments of inclusion for younger and later birth cohorts is that the
35 method allows individuals to be included in the analyses even if they do not have a complete set
36 of observations for all observations. In addition, the dependency between observations for the
37 same individuals is taken into account. Note that the dependent variable is at the level of
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STEPPARENTS' FAMILY BOUNDARIES 18

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3 observations, which means that the regression analyses reflect network membership at a specific
4 observation. Hereby we captured changes over time in stepparents' situation. We applied MLwiN
5 (Rasbash, Steele, Browne, & Goldstein, 2009) and used the Iterative Generalized Least Squares
6 method for estimation. We employed the forward modeling approach using an empty model
7 (containing only a constant) at the start and added the parameters in the subsequent steps.
8 Tolerance testing indicated that all independent variables qualified for the regression analysis
9 assumption of absence of multicollinearity. In Model 1, we estimated whether the odds that
10 stepparents had network membership of stepchildren changes across observations (Hypothesis 1)
11 by taking into account a measure for the year in which the observation was made (we computed
12 the time passed since January 1, 1992). We tested the linearity of the association by adding a
13 quadratic term of year. In Model 2, we added control variables to determine whether the effect of
14 year was robust. In Models 3 to 5, we examined stepfamily formation, partner status, and gender
15 (Hypotheses 2, 3 and 4). Partner status is time varying, for example when a partnership starts in
16 the form of a living-apart-together relationship, and changes into co-residence in the course of
17 the study. Each model is characterized by the -2 log likelihood (deviance, i.e., the lack of
18 correspondence between the model and the data). The difference between the deviance of the
19 models is chi-square (χ^2) distributed with the number of added parameters as degrees of freedom.
20 In our analyses, we compared the deviance of our models to the preceding model, in order to
21 determine whether there is an increased fit to the data. All predictor variables were centered
22 around the mean. Estimates of fixed parameters and model parameters for the final model are
23 presented, as this model provided the best fit to the data. To better understand what the actual
24 size of the estimated coefficients mean, we calculated the percentage of respondents with
25 stepchildren in their network for various values of predictor variables.
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Results

Across all observations, 73% of the stepparents had stepchildren in their personal network. To put this figure in perspective: 92% of the 201 respondents who had biological children (N observations = 576) included one or more biological children in their network.

The results of regression Model 1 confirm Hypothesis 1, as network membership of stepchildren increased significantly between 1992 and 2009 ($B = .07$; $SE B = .02$; $p < .001$). Adding a term for nonlinearity did not improve the model ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 1.3$; $p > .05$) and the term was therefore removed from the regression equation. Considering the full span of the period of data collection, it was estimated that in January 1992 63% of the stepparents had stepchildren in their personal network, and this percentage had increased to 85% in October 2009. This is an increase of 22% over a time span of 17.7 years.

The incorporation of control variables in Model 2 improved the prediction ($\chi^2_{(9)} = 168.3$; $p < .001$) of whether parents included stepchildren in their personal network, but did not alter the effect of year of observation ($B = .06$; $SE B = .02$; $Wald$ for the test of differences of coefficients = .0; $p > .05$). The more other relatives there were in the network, the more likely that stepchildren were included in the network. Controlled for effects of other predictor variables the estimates of including stepchildren were 69% when there was one relative (the first quartile) and 81% when there were five relatives (the third quartile). Having larger numbers of biological children made it less likely that stepchildren were included in the network: the estimates were 82% when there was one biological child and 76% when there were three. For the number of stepchildren, the effect is reversed: the estimates were 72% when there was one stepchild and 81% when there were three. Stepparent's age, number of non-kin in the network, educational level, and stepchildren's gender composition did not affect network membership of stepchildren.

STEPPARENTS' FAMILY BOUNDARIES 20

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3 In Model 3, we added stepfamily formation to the regression equation. This model was an
4 improvement over the Model 2 prediction ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 42.8; p < .001$), supporting Hypothesis 2.
5
6 When the stepfamily was formed when stepchildren were adult, stepparents were less likely to
7 include stepchildren in their network (the estimate is 71%) compared to stepparents with
8 stepfamily formation when children were of minor age (87%). Model 4 is an improvement over
9 the previous model ($\chi^2_{(2)} = 41.1; p < .001$), supporting Hypothesis 3 pertaining to partner status.
10
11 The estimates indicate that co-residing stepparents, whether they are married or not, were more
12 likely to include stepchildren in their network (84% and 79%, respectively) than stepparents
13 living-apart-together (53%). Noteworthy is that in this Model the effect of the timing of
14 stepfamily formation is no longer significant, disputing Hypothesis 2. Improving the Model 4
15 prediction ($\chi^2_{(1)} = 26.0; p < .001$), in Model 5 the effect of gender was analyzed. Supporting
16 Hypothesis 4, the results showed that stepmothers less often included stepchildren in their
17 network (estimated as 69%) than stepfathers (83%). The parameters of Model 5 are presented in
18 Table 3.
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36 [Insert Table 3 about here]
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39 Discussion

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41 Although much is already known about the complexity and diversity of stepfamilies, less
42 is known about the extent to which stepfamily boundaries have changed over time. We found
43 evidence for our first hypothesis that Dutch stepparents' network membership of stepchildren has
44 increased between 1992 and 2009. We estimated that in 1992 63% of the stepparents had
45 stepchildren in their personal network, and this percentage was 85% in 2009. Also, we observed
46 that network membership of stepchildren was strongly dependent on whether or not the
47 stepparent co-resided with the partner. Stepparents in non-residential stepfamilies based on a
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3 living-apart-together partnership less often included the stepchildren in their personal network,
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5 compared to stepparents in residential stepfamilies where stepchildren either entered the
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7 stepfamily as minors or adults. Stepmothers less often included stepchildren in their personal
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9 network than stepfathers.
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13 We assessed the stepfamily boundaries by examining the existence of stepchildren in a
14
15 varied manner. We increased the likelihood of identifying stepparental status by repeated
16
17 probing. In case stepchildren were only identified in the network delineation procedure the result
18
19 was an increase in the proportion of stepparents that have a stepchild in their network. In case
20
21 other probes were successful in identifying the stepparental status the result was neutral because
22
23 stepparents do not always include the stepchild in the family network. Furthermore, we took
24
25 advantage of the longitudinal design by applying backwards correction. Information on the
26
27 presence of stepchildren gathered in a follow-up observation was used to correct the stepparental
28
29 status in a previous observation in case the partnership had not changed. Backwards correction
30
31 resulted in a decrease in the proportion of stepparents that have a stepchild in their network at the
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33 previous observation as stepchildren were not identified in the family network. This multifaceted
34
35 approach of inclusion of stepparent-stepchild relationships might have affected our results, but
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37 not necessarily in a specific direction.
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44 Even with repeated probing and backwards correction it remains difficult to identify all
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46 stepfamilies. This problem is difficult to solve in survey research because it requires respondents'
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48 reports. Confirmatory register data on offspring of the partner is inaccessible, particularly when
49
50 there is not an officially registered partnership. However, as stepfamilies become more common
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52 and more socially accepted, it is likely that underreporting of these relationships might have
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54 decreased over the course of time. It should be noted that a decrease in underreporting over time
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STEPPARENTS' FAMILY BOUNDARIES 22

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3 would result in an underestimation of the results we found in this study, rather than an
4
5 overestimation.
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8 Another issue in the identification of stepchildren is that a demographic assessment of
9
10 who is a stepchild might not be entirely congruent with the perception of being 'stepparent.'
11
12 Such a discrepancy is particularly observable when looking at stepparents that have obtained
13
14 stepchildren through living-apart-together relationships or are only recently cohabiting or
15
16 married to their current partner. In these instances, although from a demographic point of view
17
18 we would determine that there is a stepparent-stepchild relationship, not all stepparents might
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20 perceive themselves as being a 'stepparent'.
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25 In this study the inclusion of stepchildren was dichotomous, i.e., we delineated personal
26
27 networks and examined whether one or more of the stepchildren was identified as network
28
29 member. It would also be valuable to examine the network membership of stepchildren in a more
30
31 nuanced manner as illustrated by Schmeeckle et al. (2006). They observed that the extent to
32
33 which adult children perceived their stepparents as family members and parents was diverse and
34
35 ran along a continuum from *fully* to *not at all*, with a large proportion of responses in between
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37 with *quite a bit* and *a little*. Although some adult children may be definitive in their perceptions
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39 of potential parent figures (e.g., stepparents either are, or are not, family members or parents),
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41 others may be more equivocal. Variability in the strength of adult children's perceptions is also
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43 suggested by two other studies. Klee, Schmidt, and Johnson (1989) observed that many children
44
45 only felt 'sort of' related to the stepparents. Gross (1986) observed that, even among children
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47 who included the stepparent as a family member, they were still not qualified as a full parents.
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49 The stepchildren's perceptions of the step-relationship are influenced by the development of the
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51 stepparent-stepchild relationship. Ganong, Coleman, and Jamison (2011) emphasized the
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3 complexity and variability in stepparent-stepchild relationships over time. Our results suggest
4 that the perceptions of how individuals experience remarriage and stepfamilies have become
5 more embedded in everyday life. The findings also amplify earlier studies that suggest that how
6 individuals define their families themselves may be as relevant as the family structure itself (Van
7 der Pas & van Tilburg, 2010). The traditional nuclear family has become 'rigid' in its structure,
8 unable to accommodate the 'permeable' boundaries that now exist for many types of families.
9 Whether the perceptions of stepfamily members are actually driven by the family as an
10 'institution' or primarily based on the individual relationship between stepparent and stepchild
11 remains unclear. In the current study our focus was on the family as an institution and we
12 analyzed the data at the family level. Future studies departing from the individual perspective
13 may study changes over time taking into account variation between stepchildren within the same
14 family.

15
16
17 Another focus of this study was to find factors associated with stepfamily boundaries.
18 Guiding the choice of these factors was the family commitment perspective. This perspective
19 argues that family members' commitment is dependent on their assessment of whether the other
20 family members want to continue their relationships in the future (Downs, 2004). We found
21 evidence for our second hypothesis that the stepfamily boundaries are affected by the duration of
22 the step-relationship, i.e., when the stepfamily was formed when stepchildren were adolescent or
23 younger, it was more likely that stepchildren were included in the network. However, this effect
24 was only observed when we did not control for partner status. Therefore, it was not so much the
25 duration of the step-relationship that had an effect, but more the living arrangement of the
26 stepparent. Supporting hypothesis 3 we observed that the inclusion of stepchildren in the network
27 was dependent on the co-residence of the partners. In the event that the stepparent does not co-
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STEPPARENTS' FAMILY BOUNDARIES 24

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3 reside with the partner (the biological parent of the stepchildren), inclusion of the stepchild in the
4 network is much lower than when the household is shared. The results suggest that co-residence
5 of the partners may be a kind of rite-of-passage for either the (step)parents themselves or the
6 adult children in accepting the physical presence of the stepparent into the household of the
7 stepparent.
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Stepmothers and stepfathers seemed to have different family boundaries when it comes to stepchildren, as we stated in hypothesis 4. We observed that stepfathers more often included stepchildren in their network than stepmothers. Prior studies have shown that the biological father and the stepfather were both involved with their (step)children and did not substitute one for the other (White & Gilbreth, 2001). As most children still live with their mothers after separation, stepfathers may focus more on their 'new' stepfamily. The family commitment perspective may also offer an explanation if one assumes that mothers stay more committed to their biological children rather than their stepchildren.

A qualitative study of Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, and Turman (2001) based on interviews with blended family members showed that becoming a 'family' is a developmental process that can take on various pathways. In many cases, establishing a sense of 'family' that was satisfying to its members took several years. It was observed that boundary management, solidarity and adaptation were particularly salient issues in the experiences of stepparents and stepchildren in blended families. They found that families who took their time to develop closer relationships between stepfamily members, had greater flexibility, open communication and constructive conflict were most successful in reaching a new definition of family satisfying to its members. Our finding that stepparents are increasingly likely to name a stepchild as an important and regular contact could be influenced by better boundary management, more flexibility and

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3 increased prevalence of constructive conflict in stepfamilies nowadays. Such a proposition could
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5 be worth exploring in subsequent studies that allow more understanding on the processes by
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7 which stepchildren become part (or do not become part) of the network of the stepparent.
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10 Although this study focuses on Dutch older adults, we do not expect the increase in
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12 stepparents' network identification of stepchildren found in our study to be unique to the
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14 Netherlands. Societal processes of loss of the strength of traditional communities have also
15
16 characterized other Northern and Western European countries as well as the United States (Allan,
17
18 2001). As part of this change, an increase in non-traditional partnerships and family behavior
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20 over the last decades has also been witnessed in these countries (Lesthaege, 1994). Therefore, we
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22 would also expect broadly similar developments towards inclusion of stepchildren in older
23
24 stepparents networks in these countries. Despite this, differences in the particular societal context
25
26 could result in different rates of change. As stated in the introduction, the Netherlands has lower
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28 rates of remarriage than the United States, making stepfamilies a more normal part of life in the
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30 United States. On the other hand, research on values suggests that the United States may be more
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32 traditional in their public opinion on family behavior . Cross-national studies or multiple national
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34 studies are needed to determine how changes in the social-cultural context over the last decades
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36 have affected stepparent-stepchildren relationships in different settings.
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43 One way to continue research on family boundaries in stepfamilies is to explore whether
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45 an increase in inclusion of step-relationships in the family may have a positive effect on support
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47 and caregiving when stepparents become dependent. Contact between parents and stepchildren is
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49 considered an important prerequisite for functional solidarity, among others the provision of
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51 instrumental and emotional assistance (Parott & Bengtson, 1999). Therefore, the finding that
52
53 older parents are more likely to name a stepchild as an important tie with whom regular contact
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STEPPARENTS' FAMILY BOUNDARIES 26

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3 is maintained, may have positive consequences for the future caregiving potential of families.
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5 However, as stated earlier, recent research shows that obligations to support older parents are
6
7 weaker when parents are not biologically related (Ganong & Coleman, 2006). We therefore do
8
9 not know whether step-relationships will continue to exist when the partner relationship ceases
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11 due to death or separation and/or when dependency arises. The degree to which more parent-
12
13 stepchild contact will be translated in more support exchange between older parents and
14
15 stepchildren will almost certainly also be dependent on the filial responsibility norms that people
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17 will attach to these relationships. Future studies could provide more evidence on the pressing
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19 issue of change of family boundaries and of intergenerational support and help over the life
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21 course of parents and children living in a stepfamily.
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STEPPARENTS' FAMILY BOUNDARIES 28

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STEPPARENTS' FAMILY BOUNDARIES 30

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Table 1

Composition of the sample by observation and by age

	1992	1992-	1995-	1998-	2001-	2005-	2008-	All
Observation		1993	1996	1999	2003	2006	2009	
First observation (cohorts included in 1992)	134	7	10	6	4	3	3	167
Follow-up observation (cohorts 1992)		98	77	56	48	37	28	344
First observation (cohorts included in 2002)					71	6	3	80
Follow-up observation (cohorts 2002)						57	55	112
<i>N</i>	2126	105	87	62	123	103	89	703
Mean Age	69.5	69.3	70.8	70.8	65.6	68.3	70.5	69.0
<i>SD</i> Age	9.4	8.8	8.1	6.4	8.1	7.7	7.0	8.3

STEPPARENTS' FAMILY BOUNDARIES 34

Table 2

Year of Observation, Demographic and Control Variables: Descriptive Statistics (N = 703 observations)

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
Year of observation ^a	7.50	6.11	.02 – 17.74
Age ^b	69.02	8.31	54.21 – 91.24
Number of relatives in network	4.11	4.33	0 – 29
Number of non-kin in network	5.56	4.95	0 – 34
Educational level ^b	9.85	3.44	5 – 18
Duration of partnership ^b	20.57	14.73	0.08 – 69.44
Number of biological children	2.17	1.71	0 – 10
Number of stepchildren	2.40	1.39	1 – 7
Stepdaughters and stepsons ^c	.44	.50	
Stepdaughters only ^c	.28	.45	
Stepsons only ^c	.27	.45	
Stepfamily formation when child is adult ^d	.68	.47	
Co-residing, married ^c	.59	.49	
Co-residing, not married ^c	.23	.42	
Not co-residing (living-apart-together) ^c	.18	.39	
Female ^d	.39	.49	

Note: Data are from 247 respondents.

^a Years since January 1, 1992. ^b Years. ^c Dummy variable. ^d Stepfamily formation: 1 = *At adult age*, 0 = *At minor age*. ^e Female: 1 = *Female*, 0 = *Male*.

Table 3

Summary of Multilevel Logistic Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting Network

Membership of Stepchildren (N = 703 observations)

Predictor	B	SE B	OR
Year of observation	0.08***	0.02	1.08
Age	0.01	0.02	1.01
Number of relatives in network	0.17***	0.04	1.18
Number of non-kin in network	0.05	0.03	1.05
Educational level	-0.01	0.04	0.99
Duration of partnership	-0.01	0.01	0.99
Number of biological children	-0.17*	0.07	0.85
Number of stepchildren	0.26*	0.12	1.30
Stepdaughters only	-0.02	0.34	0.98
Stepsons only	0.31	0.36	1.37
Stepfamily formation at adult age	-0.31	0.33	0.73
Co-residing, not married	-0.29	0.31	0.75
Not co-residing (living-apart-together)	-1.53***	0.33	0.22
Female	-0.83**	0.28	0.44
Constant	1.30***	0.13	3.67
χ^2	312.0		
<i>df</i>	14		

Note: Data are from 247 respondents. OR = Odds Ratio. Year of observation coded as number of years since January 1, 1992. Age, educational level and duration of partnership are in years.

STEPPARENTS' FAMILY BOUNDARIES 36

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3 Stepdaughters only, and stepsons only coded as 1 for *yes* and 0 for *no*. Stepdaughters and
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5 stepsons is the reference category. Stepfamily formation at adult age coded as 1 for *adult age* and
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7 0 for *minor age*. Co-residing, not married, and not co-residing (living-apart-together) coded as 1
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9 for *yes* and 0 for *no*. Co-residing, married, is the reference category. Female coded as 1 for
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11 *female* and 0 for *male*. All predictor variables centered around their mean.
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15 * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.
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