**Parents’ Perceptions of Cohesion in Diverse Stepfamilies**

# Introduction

High rates of divorce and repartnering mean that postdivorce stepfamilies are common in modern societies (Raley & Sweeney, 2020). When parents repartner after divorce, they are faced with multiple challenges. For example, parents need to adjust to their new partner and, at the same time, often feel responsible for fostering good relationships between their child and their new partner, who becomes - at least by definition - the child’s stepparent (Jensen et al., 2017). Such processes of family reorganization are often complex and difficult, which is why parents might find it difficult to feel that their stepfamily is cohesive (Ganong et al., 2019; Pink & Wampler, 1985; Waldren et al., 1990). Stepfamily cohesion refers to an overall perception of unity, closeness, and meaningful involvement regarding one’s stepfamily (Komter & Knijn, 2006; Jensen & Ganong, 2022; Waldren et al., 1990). Overall, cohesion is the feeling that one’s stepfamily is a coherent and supportive unit, rather than a disjoint patchwork (Favez et al., 2015).

Cohesion is conceptually closely related to family belonging (i.e., individuals’ feelings that they are part of the family; see King et al., 2015). Feelings of cohesion are important to investigate due to their contribution to family functioning and family members’ well-being. For example, divorced parents can profit from a more cohesive stepfamily in terms of higher perceived well-being and lower stress levels (Waldren et al., 1990). This can, in turn, positively affect their parenting, which can benefit their children (King et al., 2015). Children growing up in more cohesive stepfamilies have been found to exhibit fewer behavioral problems and report higher subjective well-being (Shigeto et al., 2014).

The limited literature on stepfamily cohesion has mostly focused on the consequences of (a lack of) stepfamily cohesion (e.g., Duncan et al., 1994, Hong et al., 2015, Shigeto et al., 2014) rather than the antecedents of perceptions of stepfamily cohesion. The few studies that do consider factors contributing to perceptions of stepfamily cohesion usually only consider the influences of the relationship qualities between different stepfamily members vis-à-vis cohesion (e.g., Jensen & Ganong, 2022). Furthermore, most of these studies only study perceptions of cohesion only in the most common stepfamily type (i.e., resident stepfather families, see e.g., Favez et al., 2015; Waldren et al., 1990).

Resident stepfather families are, however, becoming less and less the default. Stepfamilies have considerably diversified in recent decades, for example in terms of residence arrangements. Nowadays, an increasing share of parents opts for shared residence arrangements (i.e., joint physical custody) or (to a lesser extent) sole father residence (Poortman & Gaalen, 2017). Consequently, more parents experience their children living only part-time with them or mostly with their ex-partners, which can have important ramifications for how cohesive parents perceive their stepfamily. This picture can become even more complicated when one considers that in many postdivorce stepfamilies parents have a shared biological child with the new partner and that parents’ new partners can also have children from their previous relationship, who also follow a residence arrangement. Explicitly considering how perceptions of cohesion might differ between different postdivorce family constellations is important as doing so might reveal stepfamily constellations that are particularly prone to be considered as less cohesive than others, which could have detrimental consequences for parents and their children living in such stepfamilies.

In this study, we comprehensively investigate parents’ perceptions of stepfamily cohesion in diverse stepfamilies using large-scale survey data. We, first, consider differences between parents who do and who do not have a shared biological child with their current partners vis-a-vis perceptions of cohesion. Second, we consider parents’ biological child’s and potential stepchildrens’ residence arrangements. For this study, we used the third wave of the New Families in the Netherlands (NFN) survey, collected in 2020 (N=3,056). NFN is a longitudinal survey based on a probability sample of Dutch parents who divorced or separated in 2009/10. Using this data provides a unique opportunity to investigate parents’ feelings of cohesion across a wide range of postdivorce families, such as those with shared residence arrangements.

# Theoretical Background

In the following, we outline our theoretical arguments regarding how and why parents’ perceptions of stepfamily cohesion might differ between stepfamily constellations. We present our arguments from the vantage point of the so-called “focal parent” (i.e., the respondent). The focal parents are all divorced and have a biological child from their previous relationship. That child follows a residence arrangement (sole mother/father residence or shared residence). Subsequently, the focal parents entered a stable, coresidential relationship (i.e., they cohabit or are married) and thereby formed a stepfamily.

We start by describing the potential influence that having a shared biological child has on perceptions of cohesion, before describing potential group differences between focal parents’ biological children’s residence arrangements and residence arrangements of the stepchild (i.e., children from the current partners’ former union).

## Having a shared biological child

Upwards trends in remarriage and multipartner fertility imply that many repartnered parents eventually have a shared biological child with their current partner (Lappegård & Thomson, 2018). For two main reasons, having such a shared biological child can increase parents’ perceptions of stepfamily cohesion.

One line of argument is based on a shared biological child influencing perceptions of cohesion via relationship quality. Parents might deliberately seek to have a biological child with their current partner to improve and stabilize the relationship with him or her (i.e., the so-called “cement” or “concrete” baby). While doing so has been shown to potentially have negative consequences on their existing biological children’s well-being (Sanner et al., 2018), studies investigating parents’ accounts have found a positive association between having a shared child and the quality of the relationship with their new partner (Ivanova & Balbo, 2019). Relationship satisfaction has, in turn, might increase perceptions of family belonging and stepfamily cohesion (Jensen & Ganong, 2022; King & Boyd, 2016; King et al., 2015).

Another line of argument is based on shared children affecting parents’ family values and perceptions of their family in a more systemic way. The birth of a shared biological child is a substantial family structure transition, that prompts family members to renegotiate roles, boundaries, expectations, shared norms and values, and family rituals and routines (Coleman et al., 2013). For example, whereas roles and boundaries in stepfamilies tend to be permeable and - to an extent - ambiguous (Fine et al., 1992), the birth of a common child can clarify roles and boundaries as stepfamily members become biologically related to one another (Anderson, 1999; Pasley & Ihinger-Tallman, 1989). This is in line with findings from studies showing that the birth of a common child reduces uncertainty about one’s family (Downs, 2004; Friedman et al., 1994), and lower uncertainty can lead to more positive evaluations of one's family environment. Having a shared child might also make shared norms and values more concrete, as norms towards biologically related kin are stronger than those towards non-related kin. The birth of a shared child might also give parents the impression that their family is now “real”, as it corresponds more closely to the societal stereotype of what a family is, i.e., the nuclear family. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H1: Parents who have a shared biological child with their partner perceive higher extents of stepfamily cohesion than those who do not have a shared child.

## Residence of Focal Parent’s Biological Child

Whereas focal parents’ potential children with their current partners will live in their common household, their biological children with their previous partners and potential stepchildren (i.e., the current partner’s biological children from their previous relationship) can follow different postdivorce residence arrangements.

### Residence of Focal Parents’ Biological Child with the Previous Partner

In the Netherlands, three residence arrangements are common: sole mother residence (about two-thirds), shared residence (i.e., joint physical custody; about one-quarter), and sole father residence (Poortman & van Gaalen, 2017). Therefore, the focal parent might be a resident parent (i.e., the biological child resides mostly in his/her household), a nonresident parent (i.e., the biological child might reside mostly in the household of the ex-partner), or a part-time resident parent (i.e., the child lives about half of the time in the focal parent’s and half of the time in the ex-partner’s household).

Nonresident parents likely perceive the lowest extent of stepfamily cohesion. For once, nonresident parents’ contact opportunities with their biological children are inherently limited as they typically see their children only every (other) weekend (Kelly, 2007). Such limited contact might mean that nonresident parents could feel that they are missing out on a substantial part of their children’s lives and feel that they are the “unimportant parent” (Kielty, 2005; Stewart, 1999). Furthermore, nonresident parents also have fewer opportunities for forming a new stepfamily comprising their biological child, their current partner, and themselves due to time constraints or their children resisting such attempts (Jensen & Howard, 2015). In sum, due to their child living mostly outside of their household, nonresident parents might consider their stepfamily as factually nonexistent, let alone cohesive (Kielty, 2005).

Part-time resident parents face unique challenges in creating stepfamily cohesion. On the one hand, their children reside part-time in their household, which gives focal parents greater opportunities to create a stepfamily, for example by incorporating their children into new family routines (Bakker et al., 2015). On the other hand, shared residence arrangements imply that the stepfamily is constantly in flux (Carlsund et al., 2014). Parents might experience their child constantly “entering and leaving” their family as stressful, as they must regularly switch between a life with and without their child. Though some parents might appreciate such a clear distinction between time with and without their children (Botterman et al., 2015), for others shared residence might be challenging (Walper et al., 2021). The lack of stability and temporal compartmentalization of family life might make it difficult for part-time resident parents to feel a sense of cohesion.

Resident parents’ stepfamily situation corresponds most closely to what societal family values prescribe a family should look like: a couple plus a child living in the same household. This arrangement, thus, corresponds most closely to the pre-divorce situation, especially in terms of contact opportunities. Resident parents see their children almost every day and can easily engage in family routines and rituals with them, such as having shared dinners (Bakker et al., 2015; Waller & Jones, 2014). Taken together, these factors could give focal parents the feeling that they are a “real”, cohesive, stepfamily (Weaver & Coleman, 2010). We, thus, hypothesize that:

H2a: Resident focal parents perceive the highest extent of stepfamily cohesion, followed by part-time resident focal parents and nonresident focal parents.

### Presence and Residence of Stepchildren

Whether focal parents have stepchildren and in which household such potential stepchildren live might substantially affect parents’ perceptions of stepfamily cohesion. If the focal parent’s current partner also has a child from a previous relationship, logically, both the focal parent and the current partner are simultaneously biological parents and stepparents.

On the one hand, it has been argued that both partners already having a child creates a “level playing field” (Fine, 1996). Both partners know what it means to be a parent, which might reduce friction and clarify the stepparent's otherwise ambiguous role. On the other hand, acquiring a stepchild is, for many parents, still an ambiguous gain (Jensen, 2021), which means that parents might be unclear about how to relate to their new stepchild and what the stepchild’s place in the family is. Such uncertainty about roles and boundaries might reduce parents’ perceptions that their stepfamily is a cohesive unit (Downs, 2004). Empirical studies investigating parents’ well-being, furthermore, overall point to having a stepchild being demanding and potentially detrimental to parents’ well-being. For once, establishing and negotiating relationships with a stepchild is an often long and difficult process (Ganong et al., 1999). Studies have shown that many parents report feeling rejected by their stepchildren and might suffer from depressive symptoms as a result (Ganong et al., 2011; Shapiro & Stewart, 2011). Feeling rejected by one's stepchild is, logically, likely also detrimental to perceiving one’s stepfamily as cohesive. Furthermore, it might be stressful to concurrently perform the role of the biological parent and stepparent, especially given the stepparent role is up to negotiation with the current partner (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020). As a result, stepparents might be likely to experience role and parenting strains, which may induce conflicts and disagreements with the current partner. Such conflicts likely being detrimental to feeling that one’s stepfamily is cohesive.

The extent to which such negative consequences of having stepchildren become salient likely differs according to where their stepchild lives. Focal parents’ stepchildren can follow residence arrangements like their biological children's. Hence, focal parents can have a nonresident stepchild, a part-time resident stepchild, or a resident stepchild. Focal parents with residential stepchildren are exposed more frequently and intensively to their stepchildren than are focal parents with nonresident or part-time resident stepchildren, which implies that they might be the ones perceiving the lowest extent of stepfamily cohesion. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H2b: Focal parents without stepchildren perceive the highest extent of stepfamily cohesion, followed by those with nonresident stepchildren, part-time resident stepchildren, and, lastly, resident stepchildren.

# Data and Method

I calculated the N (with missing values on the relevant variables excluded, so this is the most conservative sample size) (see next page).

| **Selection** | Sample size |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **N original** | 3,056 |  |  |  |
| **N repartnered (mar/cohab)** | 1,456 |  |  |  |
| **N at least one resident child (complete cases)** | 569 |  |  |  |
| **N at least one resident child and focal child < 18** | 138 |  |  |  |

569 seems OK, but we could (should?) consider doing a sensitivity power analysis to be sure.

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