Parents’ Perceptions of Stepfamily Cohesion

Stepfamily Cohesion

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# Introduction

Divorce and stepfamily formation are common in modern societies (Raley & Sweeney, 2020). When parents repartner, they are faced with multiple challenges. For example, parents need to learn to live with a 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 Waldren et al. (1990). Stepfamily cohesion refers to an overall perception of unity, closeness, and meaningful involvement regarding one’s stepfamily Jensen & Ganong (2022). It 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 e.g., King, Boyd, & Thorsen, 2015). Feelings of cohesion are important to investigate due to their contribution to family functioning and family members’ well-being. 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 benefits their children (King et al., 2015). Children growing up in more cohesive stepfamilies have been found to exhibit fewer behavioral problems and score higher on subjective well-being (Shigeto, Mangelsdorf, & Brown, 2014).

The limited literature on stepfamily cohesion has mostly focused on the consequences of (a lack of) stepfamily cohesion, (e.g., Duncan, Duncan, & Hops, 1994; Hong et al., 2015; Shigeto et al., 2014). The few studies that consider factors contributing to perceptions of cohesion are usually limited to considering the influences of the relationship qualities between stepfamily member (e.g., Jensen & Ganong, 2022). Besides it seeming somehwat trite that relationship qualities are related to perceptions of cohesion, perceptions of cohesion are likely influenced by more than just relationship qualities. Rather, structural aspects of stepfamilies, such as whether there are shared biological children resident in the household, or postdivorce residence arrangements have been shown to substantially affect parents’ perceptions of what their family constitues in the first place, and how they perceive living in “their” stepfamily. Therefore, it is conceivable that there might be systematic differences between the extent to which stepfamilies are considered cohesive.

Disregarding stepfamily structure obscures the substantial heterogeneity among contemporary postdivorce stepfamilies. Whereas in the past, most stepfamilies were formed after mothers remarried (i.e., most stepfamilies were stepfather families), at present, postdivorce stepfamilies are an evermore heterogeneous group. The primary reason for this growing heterogeneity is the widespread adoption of postdivorce residence arrangements other than sole mother residence. Nowadays, in many (Western) countries, it is becoming increasingly common that fathers are (more) involved with their children after divorce. This finds expression in more and more parents practicing shared residence (i.e., shared physical custody). Parents practicing such shared residence arrangements have been found to experience family life differently than their sole resident peers, for example in terms of a sense of preservation of free time. This could lead to parents who practice shared residence perhaps - on average - perceiveing their stepfamilies as relatively more cohesive. Due to the connection between perceptions of cohesion and parent’s and children’s well-being, considering differences in cohesion among postdivorce families could uncover stepfamily constellations that are especially (un)likely to be considered cohesive, and more targeted interventions could be constructed for these families in particular.

In this study, we comprehensively investigate parents’ perceptions of stepfamily cohesion in diverse stepfamilies using large-scale probabilistic 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 the of parents’ biological child’s and potential stepchildrens’ residence arrangements. While not central to our study, our analysis also controls for other factors which might affect perceptions of stepfamily cohesion, such as the child’s age and gender. 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 random probability sample of Dutch parents who divorced or separated in 2009/10. Using this data provides the 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 will outline our theoretical arguments regarding how and why postdivorce stepfamily structure can influence parents’ perceptions of stepfamily cohesion. We phrase our arguments from the vantage point of the so-called “focal parents” (i.e., the respondents of the NFN survey). The focal parents are all divorced and have a child from their previous relationship. Subsequently, they entered a stable, coresidential relationship (i.e., they cohabit or a married).

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

Many repartnered parents go on to having a shared biological child with their current partner, with that new child being the halfsibling of parents’ children from their prior unions. For two main reasons, having such a shared biological child can increase parents’ perceptions of stepfamily cohesion.

The first argument is based on relationship quality. As has been frequently stated in form of the “concrete baby” hypothesis, parents might deliberately seek to have a biological child with their current partner to improve and stabilize the relationship with him or her. While doing so might have negative consequences of their existing biological childrens’ well-being, empirical assessments of this conjecture have indeed shown a positive association between having a shared biological child and relationship satisfaction. Relationship satisafction has, in turn, been consistently shown to have a positive association with stepfamily cohesion.

Another argument is based on having a shared child changing parents’ family values and perceptions of their family in a more systemic way. The birth of a shared biological child represents a subtantial family structure transition, that requires all family members to renegotiate role, boundaries, expectations, shared norms and values, and family rituals and routines: a baby changes everything. Whereas such transitions can be onerous, they offer countless opportunities for improving upon the status quo. For example, whereas roles and boundaries in stepfamilies tend to be permeable and - to an extent - ambiguous,

-> roles need to be renegotiated

-> greater clarity about roles

-> adds stability to union -> more optimistic assessments -> less uncertainty -> uncertainty reduction theory [uncertainty] -> reducing uncertainty leads to higher family functioning and postivite global assessments of the family. Studies have found that having a shared child reduces uncertainty, makes roles less unclear.

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.

## Child’s postdivorce residence arrangement

-> in NL -> permeability -> in case of **shared residence**: time with and time without kids. -> in case of **resident children**

## residence stepchildren

-> having kids per se changes perception of what ones family is, though not uniformely so: strongly depends on where the child lives.

# Data and Method

-> selection: -> Exclude people who do not currenlty have a new partner (singletons + LAT relationships), N remaining=1,465 -> there needs to be at least one part-time resident child in the household -> only new biochild not enough -> would probably not be considered a steprelationship/stepfamily

## Measures of Dependent Variable

*Stepfamily cohesion*

## Measures of Independent Variables

*Having a biological child with the current partner*

*Presence stepchild*

*Residence stepchild*

*Residence biological child*

## Measures of Control Variables

## Analytical Strategy

First, we imputed missing values using multiple imputations by chained equations in R.

Next, we estimated two multilevel linear regression models using lme4 in R. We used multilevel -> Multiple regression in Python

# Results

# Discussion and Conclusion

# References

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