Parents’ Perceptions of Stepfamily Cohesion

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# Introduction

Divorce and stepfamily formation are common in modern societies [@raley\_divorce\_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 [@jensen2017transitioning]. 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 [@ganong2019stepfathers @pink1985problem @waldren1990cohesion]. Stepfamily cohesion refers to an overall perception of unity, closeness, and meaningful involvement regarding one’s stepfamily [@komter2006strength @waldren1990cohesion @jensen2022associations].

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 [@waldren1990cohesion]. This can, in turn, positively affect their parenting, which benefits their children [@king2015adolescents]. Children growing up in more cohesive stepfamilies have been found to exhibit fewer behavioral problems and score higher on subjective well-being [@shigeto2014roles].

The limited literature on stepfamily cohesion has mostly focused on the consequences of (a lack of) stepfamily cohesion [e.g., @duncan1994effects @hong2015interactive @shigeto2014roles]. 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., @jensen2022associations] and study cohesion only in the most common stepfamily type (i.e., resident stepfather families, see e.g., @favez2015coparenting @jensen2022associations).

The stereotypical resident stepfather family has, however, become less of a default stepfamily constellation in recent years. Stepfamilies have considerably diversified, for example in terms of residence arrangements [@raley\_divorce\_2020]. Nowadays, an increasing share of parents opt for shared residence arrangements (i.e., joint physical custody) or (to a lesser extent) sole father residence. Consequently, more parents experience their children living half the time or even mostly with their ex-partners, with structurally reduced access to the child potentially implying that such stepfamilies are considered less cohesive. This picture becomes even more complicated when one considers that in many postdivorce stepfamilies parents have a shared biological child with the new partner, and their new partners can also have children from their previous relationship, who also follow similar residence arrangements. It is vital to consider such postdivorce stepfamily diversity, as doing so could reveal stepfamily constellations that are particularly prone to be considerd as less cohesive than others, with potentially detrimental consequences for parents and their children living in those types of stepfamilies.

In this study, we comprehensively investigate parents’ perceptions of stepfamily cohesion in diverse stepfamilies. We first, consider how the extent to which parents consider their stepfamilies as cohesive differ between three common stepfamily constellations: a) having only a residential biological child, b) having a residential biological child and a residential stepchild, and c) having a residential biological child and a nonresidential stepchild (or vice-versa). Within these three constellations, we, furthermore, investigate the effect of part-time residency of at least one of the children. Second, we consider the effect of parents having a shared biological child with their current partners (a “concrete baby”) vis-a-vis cohesion. 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 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

We base our theoretical arguments on various factors that might influence the extent to which different stepfamilies are considered cohesive: relationship qualities, opportunities for contact and bonding between stepfamily members, and the continuity of relationships in different stepfamily configurations.

Our arguments are, for the most part, phrased from the vantage point of a “focal parent” (i.e., the respondent), who has a child from a previous relationship and is currently in a stable (i.e., cohabitational or marital) relationship with their current partner. Their current partner can also have a stepchild, and the focal parent can have a biological child with their current partner (i.e., a “concrete baby”). In other words, the focal parents are part of stepfamilies where there are one or two stepchildren, and possibly a halfsibling. We are only considering stepfamilies in which at least one of the children from the focal parents’ or current partner’s former relationship is (part)time resident in focal parents’ household. This is because stepfamily cohesion likely applies less to stepfamily situations without any resident children.

## Biological child’s and stepchild’s residence arrangements

Both the focal parent’s existing biological child and their current partner’s potential child from a previous union can either live (part-time) with the focal parent (i.e., they are residential) or they live with the respective ex-partner (i.e., from the perspective of the focal parent, they are nonresidential). Excluding the scenario where both children are nonresidential, the combinations of both children’s residence arrangements yield three distinct scenarios or household structures.

The first - and most simple - scenario is that there is only one residential child (from the focal parent), but no stepchild (i.e., the current partner does not have a child from their previous union). In such a stepfamily, it might be comparatively easy to foster stepfamily cohesion. While establishing relationships between stepparents and stepchildren is usually a difficult process [@ganong2017stepfamily], it might be easier if there is only one new family member that needs to be integrated (i.e., only the current partner)[@gennetian2005one @pylyser2018stepfamilies], and especially so when all stepfamily members reside in the same household [@arat2022parental]. In that scenario, the stepparent has ample opportunities for engaging with their stepchild [@landon2022stop] and focal parents can guide their current partners in taking up the role of the stepparent [@ganong2011patterns @ceballo2004gaining]. Furthermore, focal parents and their current partners have many opportunities to create a sense of family belonging and cohesion by performing family routines and rituals together [@fang2022family]. Naturally, when all stepfamily members reside in the same household, this can make differences in norms, values, and habits especially salient [@landon2022stop], though coresidence might also allow many opportunities for working through such conflicts and establishing a cordial relationship and stepfamily cohesion.

In the second scenario, both the focal parent and their current partner have a residential biological child from a previous union. Phrased differently, the household comprises two residential stepchildren. Life in such a stepfamily might be more complex than in simple stepfamilies that only comprise one stepchild [@landon2022stop]. For once, both the focal parent and their current partner need to get to know their new stepchild and simultaneously adopt the role of a stepparent [@pylyser2018stepfamilies]. This can be an often long, difficult, and at times frustrating process, that both (step)parents go through at the same time, which can cause frictions. Second, relationships between stepchildren are often frought with conflict and ambiguity [@landon2022stop @sanner2018half], which can have a negative impact on focal parents’ perceptions of stepfamily cohesion. On the other hand, as in the first scenario, both children being residential gives all stepfamily members ample opportunities to get to know one another and build family routines [@landon2022stop], which implies that the often tumulous phase of stepfamily members could be overcome relatively easily. On the other hand, there is the potential for frictions among stepfamily members to persist perpetually, which could imply that - on average - life in such “blended” stepfamilies is more challenging and that these stepfamilies are, as a result, perceived as less cohesive.

The third scenario involves one of the children being residential, and the other child being nonresidential. In other words, the children’s residence arrangements are assymmetrical. Such asymmetric residence arrangements might be even more challenging to navigate than the second scenario outlined above. For once, whereas it is easy to build stepfamily cohesion through family rituals and routines when children are residential, this is more difficult when children are spread across households [@manning2003complexity]. Practicing routines and rituals becomes more difficult and less-self evident, for example as more planning is necessary (e.g., when are both children at home?) [@ambert1986being @schlinzig2019between]. This also implies that, if one of the children is nonresidential, that parent might to some extent still be involved in their “old family”, which can lead to a less clear separation between the “old” and the “new” family. Family boundaries might, as a result, also be less clear [@stewart2005boundary]. Assymmetries in residence arrangements can, furthermore, also evoke feelings of guilt [@kalmijn2020guilt]. For example, focal parents with a resident biological child and a nonresident stepchild might feel guilty about being able to spend so much time with their child while their partner cannot do the same. Conversely, if the focal parent is the nonresident parent, the current partner might feel guilty about them not getting to see their child a lot, which can spill over into focal parents’ assessment of their stepfamily as cohesive. Based on these arguments, we expect *stepfamilies with a resident child and no stepchild to be perceived as most cohesive, followed by stepfamilies with two residential children, and, lastly, stepfamilies with a residential and a nonresidential child* (H1a).

These three scenarios can be further complicated by taking into account that either child or both children might follow a shared residence arrangment (i.e., they are part-time resident). In case of shared residence, the child in question constantly moves between the household of the focal parent and that of the (current partner’s) ex-partner. This implies that focal parents’ (and their partners’) access to the children in question is limited [@arat2022parental], compared to if the children resided full time-in their household, which can make it difficult to practice family routines and rituals that involve all core stepfamily members. Additionally, in case of shared residence, parents might, to an extent, be still entangled in their “previous” families [@emery1994conceptualizing]. Aspects of the child’s life - financial matters, division of holidays etc. - need to be constantly negotiated with the ex-partner(s). Resultingly, family boundaries can become unclear to family members [@zartler2021children], making it difficult for parents to perceive their stepfamilies as cohesive. We, therefore hypothesize that *if either or both the biological child or stepchild are part-time resident, perceptions of cohesion will be lower* (H1b).

# Having a shared biological child

Besides comprising children from previous unions, many postdivorce stepfamilies also include a halfsibling, meaning a shared biological child of the focal parent and the current partner [@sanner2020shared]. In postdivorce stepfamilies, having a shared biological child often has a high symbolic value for parents, above and beyond fulfilling the desire for (further) offspring. For example, the commitment hypothesis, having a shared biological child is used to signal commitment to each other: focal parents (and their ex-partners) might want to have a child together to show to each other that they are “serious” about their new relationship, that they have moved on from their prior unions, and that they wish to focus on their new family [@vikat1999stepfamily]. Additionally, per the uncertainty reduction hypothesis, having a shared child might be a delibrate strategy to reduce uncertainty about the new relationship [@uncertainty]. Stepfamilies are considered less institutionalized than “first-time, two biological parents families” [@cherlin1978remarriage], which might mean that parents feel ambiguity regarding the roles and boundaries in their stepfamilies. By reproducing, the stepfamily becomes more alike a first-time family, which can make roles, boundaries, norms, and values clearer, which can lead to more positive assessments of stepfamily cohesion. Relatedly, the birth of a biological child can tightly integrate all family members, as the birth of a further biological child establishes blood ties between all stepfamily members [@bernstein1990yours]. For example, whereas many parents perceive their current partners (i.e., the stepparent) to be outsiders, having a biological child with them can integrate them more tightly into the existing stepfamily and make them a “real” family member [@bernstein1990yours @castren2015insiders]. Parents’ children from their prior relationships become biologically related to the new child (as halfsiblings), which might lead to closer and more amicable bonds between them [@sanner2018half]. Thus, the birth of a shared biological child can evoke in the focal parent the perception that their stepfamily is now “complete” and tight-knit and “cemented” - thus, cohesive [@ganong1988mutual].

On the other hand, there are also reasons to assume that the birth of a common biological child might not substantially change - or even decrease - the extent to which stepfamilies are perceived as cohesive. For once, the birth of a mutual child does not necessarily lead stepparents to invest more in their stepchildren, which implies that one of the parents (probably the mother) has to care for both their stepchild as well as their biological child(ren) [@stewart2005birth]. This can be stressful and evoke perceptions of unfairness, leading to reduced perceptions of cohesion. Furthermore, the birth of a shared child can also induce conflict among stepfamily members. For example, the existing biological children might be opposed to the birth of the child, or they might feel “second class children” as parental attention and investments might shift towards the newborn [@sanner2018half @baham2008sibling]. Resultingly, they might feel resentment towards their (step)parents. Focal parents might pick up on such conflicts, which can reduce their perceptions of stepfamily cohesion.

Prior research and theoretical arguments thus paint a mixed picture. Ganong and Coleman concluded that while there is not much evidence that a concrete baby “works” in the way parents might intend, they argued that a concrete baby might still “work” as intended due to cognitive bias: parents might post hoc argue that “they had a child, therefore it was the right decision” [@ganong2017stepfamily @ganong1988mutual], which aligns with findings that the birth of a common child leads to more postive assessements of relationship qualities [@ivanova2019cementing]. We, thus, assume that *Parents who have a shared biological child assess their stepfamilies as more cohesive than those who do not have a biological child* (H2).

# References